



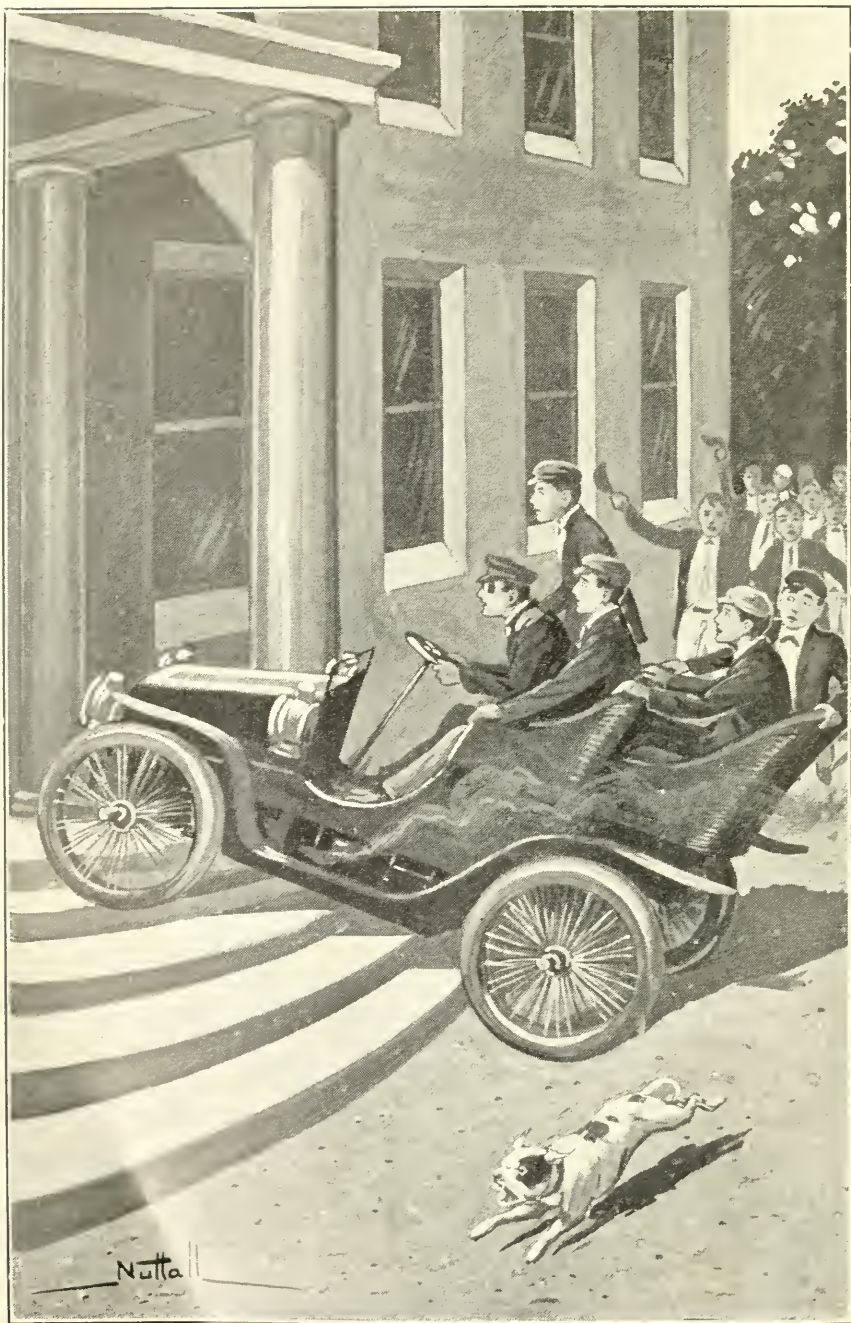
JACK RANGER'S SCHOOLDAYS

CLARENCE YOUNG



Jack Marschner

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RAN STRAIGHT UP THE BROAD STEPS OF THE ACADEMY.—
Page 115.

JACK RANGER'S SCHOOLDAYS

Or

The Rivals of Washington Hall

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "THE MOTOR BOYS," "THE MOTOR BOYS OVERLAND," "THE
MOTOR BOYS IN MEXICO," "THE MOTOR BOYS ACROSS
THE PLAINS," ETC.

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Or the Rivals of Washington Hall.

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JACK RANGER'S SCHOOLDAYS.

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JACK RANGER'S SCHOOLDAYS

CHAPTER I

THE JUMPER FROM BUMPER'S

"ROLLING WATERMELONS!"

"Say, what's that?" asked Archie Farson, with a start.

"Never you mind. You go on with your work," directed Jack Ranger. "It's only Nat Anderson. He's given to explosives. Got that pad done?"

"Not yet."

"You'll have to work faster, if you expect to earn that dollar I promised you."

"Jupiter's pancakes!"

"It's something really serious when Nat Anderson gets classical that way," observed Jack, laying down on the work bench before him a pronged piece of iron he was fitting with a wooden handle.

Jack walked across the floor of a barn loft fitted up as a workroom. It held several benches, a variety of tools, and backed on the business street of the pleasant little town of Denton.

This barn was at the rear of Jack's home. His "folks" were three old maiden aunts. The sun rose and set for Jack, they assumed, and nothing was ever too good for the boy.

He had a laboratory and a gymnasium in the house proper, but for rougher manual labor and tinkering he had appropriated the old disused barn loft. His aunts fitted it up as he willed. This particular bright Spring afternoon Jack seemed using it to some purpose.

He appeared to be really making something. He had hired Archie Farson to help him. Archie, familiarly known as "Fathead," was proving a costly experiment. He was a jelly-faced, indolent, wall-eyed fellow. Jack had set him the task of saturating half-a-dozen thick felt sheets about the size of door mats with purple ink. Of this ink Archie had several large bottles before him and a goodly quantity of it upon him.

Jack himself had been busy constructing two curious devices resembling lawn mowers. Archie had nearly worked himself into a fit trying to guess for what they were to be used. He quizzed Jack, but to no purpose. His employer was tantalizingly non-committal and mysterious. Archie would work a little and then he would nearly fall asleep, exhausted through the hard process of guessing. The sharp, sudden ejaculations from the floor be-

low had roused him. He suspended work entirely to watch the top of the stairway.

"Well, Nat, what's up now?" challenged Jack as, his chum and fast friend came up the stairs.

"Withering spangdoodles!" exploded the newcomer.

Nat Anderson walked into the middle of the room with animated gestures and a wry, expressive face. Every step he took came an ominous r-r-rip-r-r-rip-r-r-rip! Archie, stupid and puzzled, stared solemnly, his lips drooping like a fish's gills. Jack surveyed his chum with his usual keen, intelligent glance. Then his face puckered and he broke into uproarious laughter.

"What is it?" he propounded, "disguise or masquerade?"

Nat Anderson struck a tragic pose. He faced around with a spring. This showed to advantage a brand-new work jumper that bulged out from him like a half-inflated gas bag.

"See it!" he shrieked, "oh, only see it!"

He shot up one arm and it tore the jumper sleeve loose at the socket. He bent sideways and a long slit appeared in the rotten back of the garment. He gave it a pull at the belt and all the buttons came off.

"Jibe! jeer!" he raved, glaring with mock ferocity of eye, but with plenty of realism in his

actions. " ' R-r-rip ! ' says that rotten old garment, eh? Well, r-r-revenge ! say I. Come here, both of you. Do you see that sign? "

Nat Anderson strode towards the back window looking out on the main business street of Denton. He pointed a finger towards the store fronts facing them. He moved that finger past the town bank, across the village hardware store, past the post-office, across the drug store and an ice cream parlor, and let it rest like an index of doom where a brilliant plate-glass double-front bore the legend in shining gold letters on a black-sanded sign:

BUMPER'S DRY GOODS PALACE.

" Hello ! " ejaculated Jack Ranger, quickly connecting the tattered jumper with the evident source of its purchase, then with a weird, knowing chuckle connecting Nat Anderson with both. " Do I sleep? Do I dream? Do I wonder and doubt? Are things what they seem? Or are visions about? Nat Anderson, you didn't have the folly to buy that jumper from Old Bumps? "

Nat bowed his head solemnly, his finger still pinning the gilded store front against the atmosphere, as if it was some fly he had transfixed and was not going to let it get away from him.

" Then of all the chumps known to science you are the rankest," declared Jack. " Why, since

Bumper's opening night, when we sprayed that half-pound of dried snuff down through the skylight over the middle of the store, Bumper has been trying to devise a way to get even with us. You needed a work jumper. Then why didn't you buy it of Babbitt?"

"I was in a hurry to get to work with you and Bumper's was nearest," mumbled Nat sheepishly.

"Yes, nearest to being the grandest emporium of dissolving garments on record," laughed Jack hilariously. "Well, tear the tattered ensign down and get to labor. I'll lend you an old sweater."

"No!" shouted Nat, with a majestic stamp of his foot. Bumper! Bumper first, Bumper last, Bumper all of the time till I square accounts. Say, Jack Ranger, that man is a Diabolus!"

"Who's he?" gawked Archie uneasily.

"Mephistopholes!" roared Nat. "He's a pervert, a mystic. He must have nursed his wrath, guessing I would come in some day to buy a jumper, so he must have prepared this one especially. Oh, yes, that's the way of it," insisted Nat bitterly. "I'm stung bad. He must have ordered a specially-guaranteed, thread-rotted sample. I saw a smooth, happy grin on his rascally old face as he bowed me out of the store, pocketing my seventy-nine cents. Behold the celebrated dissolving views from Bumper's. Number 23: the disappearing jumper. Whoof — gone!" and

with a whirl Nat tore free what was left of the extraordinary garment, guaranteed not to shrink because it ripped first. "And now," pronounced Nat in a hoarse, guttural tone, "now to get even with Mr. Special-Bargain Bumper!"

"Rather, now to cease your heroics and get down to work," suggested Jack practically. "There's need of it. Remember: our contract calls for the delivery of the goods at a fixed time."

"Eh? what goods? what time?" piped in Archie, his curiosity again stimulated by his employer's vague illusions.

"Say, you go on following orders," said Jack, "And please get a little more of the ink on the pads and a little less on your hands and face, will you?"

"Humph!" growled Archie disgustedly, with a "crushed again!" expression on his flabby face.

But Nat was not to be diverted from the topmost thought in his mind. He now doubled a fist and shook it at the store his finger had indicated.

"'Dry Goods Palace,'" he said slowly, dramatically. "Ha! I'll make it a hovel. Bumper! I'll make him bump the bumps. Hurrah! An inspiration! I've got it. I'll do it. Jack, you've got a magnifying glass?"

"Why you know that — three of four of them."

"I want the biggest one."

"What for?"

"Never mind. Where is it?"

"In the laboratory room up at the house. But see here — what do you want of it?"

"Tell you later. I'll be back in a minute, but I can't stop just now. Glorious idea, ha! I'm going to bump Bumper, ho!"

And Nat Anderson shot for the stairs and down them with a rush.

CHAPTER II

A TRADE SECRET

ARCHIE FARSON began to look wild. His slow-going mind could not take in and analyze so much mystery, uproar and confusion all at once. The lower door slammed shut after the departing visitor.

"Say," observed Archie, rubbing his head confusedly and thereby smearing it copiously with the purple ink, "I'm flabbergasted!"

"What's the trouble, Fathead?" questioned Jack.

"That's enough!" cried his employe, dropping the work he had resumed and assuming an affronted attitude. "I strike."

"What for?"

"Insult. You called me 'Fathead.' Bargain was I was to be treated like a gentleman. Guess I've got some feelings—reckon I've got some dignity," and the offended Archie began to strip off his work apron.

"Now see here, Mr. Farson," said Jack, masking a grin, "I really beg your pardon. I fell

into a familiar error quite unintentionally, I assure you. I see now that Fathead is a misnomer."

Archie glanced sideways and suspiciously at his employer. He did not know what "misnomer," meant, and did not like to show his ignorance by asking. Jack was so smooth and suave that his rancor was disarmed.

"Oh, well," he mumbled, "if you put it that way of course I can't take any offense."

"I should hope not — Archibald," said Jack gravely.

Archie winched. Worse than "Fathead" he hated that full name, mimicked by every village boy who had ever heard his mother mincingly pronounce it.

"I can't stand everything, though," wandered on Archie. "That Nat gives me the jumps. What's he after your magnifying glass for, anyway?"

"I really don't know," asserted Jack.

"And say, Ranger," pursued Archie, "what are you ever making here with these rollers and those pads?"

"Oh, a little experiment," answered Jack evasively.

"Tell you what I'll do," eagerly suggested the curiosity-consumed Archie. "You're going to pay me a dollar for my work here, ain't you?"

"If you ever get it finished, yes."

"I'll give you the dollar — I'll do the work for nothing if you'll just tell me what you really are up to."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," declared Jack. "It's a trade secret."

"Nat Anderson knows about it, don't he?"

"Yes, but Nat is a partner, you see."

"Why don't you make me a partner, then?" persisted Archie.

Jack bit his lip to keep from roaring outright. He managed to say seriously:

"There might not be enough dividends to go around with any more stockholders, you see."

"Then there's money in it, is there?" suggested Archie covetously.

"Maybe."

"Humph!"

Archie resumed his work with a glum face. Jack potted away at his, breaking into his usual cherry whistle. If he too wondered what use Nat intended to make of his magnifying glass, he did not let it distract his mind from the labor in hand.

The conveyance Jack was fashioning grew more and more to resemble a lawn mower as the moments flew past. By and by he looked it all over critically, and rolled it towards the door of a little partitioned-off room at one end of the barn loft.

Its door was locked. Jack took a key from his

pocket, opened it, and wheeled the contrivance within and closed the door after him.

"Wish I knew," muttered Archie blankly, staring at the tightly sealed partition. "'Contract,' 'dividends,' regular Bluebeard's room. Ranger's smart. He ain't taking all this trouble for nothing. Here I am working my hide off for a measly dollar and that fellow Anderson hasn't turned a hand. Oh, no — he's 'a stockholder' ! And there's money in it !"

"It" was a grand scheme, although Jack Ranger had not told Archie so. Jack, secure from observation with the little partitioned-off room, rather proudly surveyed the fruits of his labors.

"Now this will quite do," he soliloquized, pushing the device to and fro on its two wheels, "works like a charm. All it needs now is the pads and the rubber stencil fastened around the cylinders. I declare, as Aunt Angelina would say, you wouldn't think it was in me. An inventor ! Jack Ranger really starting something useful. And really finishing it up !"

Jack indulged in a hearty, satisfied laugh, all to himself. He was the brightest boy in Denton and one of the best. Most youths in Jack's enviable position would have been spoiled or vicious. You couldn't spoil Jack. He was manly, head and heart. As to doing anything really bad, he was too full of jolly good nature for that.

The rock that Jack had split on in a way was mischief. He was brim-full of fun and frolic. He would scheme all day to plan a harmless trick, he would stay up half the night to execute it.

Nat Anderson, his favorite chum, was an active lieutenant in all these operations — a fun-loving, harmless boy all through. He was a little more reckless and excitable than Jack, but held in proper bonds by the latter, whom he loved loyally.

Jack had a very pleasant home. As long back as he could remember, he had free range over the famous old nest of comfort and plenty over which Aunt Angelina presided. She was quite as angelic as her name — a patient, lovable old maid, idolizing her nephew, and never believing any unpleasant complaint made against him until Jack himself admitted its truth.

Aunt Josephine was the reverse of her younger sister, Mary. The latter was eminently a woman of tears. When anything went wrong about the housekeeping, she sat down and had a good crying spell. Whenever Jack got into a boyish scrape, she wept over him. On the contrary, Aunt Josephine was a bubbling well of jollity. Her life was a continual smile. She would convulse till the tears rolled down her cheeks when some neighbor complained of how Jack had painted a cow gorgeously, or put a litter of pigs in a dove

cote steeple. To her Jack was a genius of the first water, who would some day startle the world with some brilliant invention.

On the whole, Jack got on pleasantly with his three gracious relatives. They were affectionate, indulgent and easily persuaded. Jack was truthful, lively and chivalrous. He supposed himself to be an orphan. As he grew older, however, he guessed there was some secret concerning his life. He was told that when he became of age he would inherit considerable money. When, however, he asked his aunts why, and about his father and mother, even jolly Aunt Josephine would look grave, and Angelina would tell him the time had not yet come when they were permitted to enlighten him as to his early childhood.

As said, Jack was pretty well satisfied with himself at the present time. He had invented two machines. They had been made for a purpose. If they worked, Jack and Nat were to receive fifty dollars between them. Further, if the machines worked at all, it must be between the next midnight and dawn — secretly and silently, while others slept.

“We are practically ready,” said Jack. “Soon as Fathead gets those pads soaked, Nat and I will get rid of him and put the things together. Then to wait till midnight. I hope it will be dry and

fair. Yes," continued Jack, glancing through a little window at the bright blue sky, "it's going to be clear as a bell."

Jack walked over to a wide table. On this lay a written sheet of paper. Beside it were several pads of rubber. These were stenciled with large letters.

"That contract gives us some good spending money," said Jack, approvingly glancing over the written sheet of paper. "Wish Nat would come back. He don't have to do any 'getting even' with Old Bumper. This business here will turn a trick on Bumper, and do a good turn for poor Babbitt, that will make the Dry Goods Palace look like fifteen cents for two weeks to come. Hello! broke loose again, eh?"

There was a stir, a shout and a series of vivid ejaculations from the outer room. Jack flew to the door and pulled it open.

At one of the windows facing the main street stood Archie Farson. He was hopping about like a hen on a hot gridiron, so excited that, as he danced up and down, his face was contorted into the most extravagant expressions.

"Rolling shoestrings!" he was shouting in erratic imitation of explosive, but original Nat Anderson. "Cæsar's watermelons! Jupiter's slapjacks! Hi, say — hurry, Ranger, look there — look there!"

Jack rushed to the window. His quick eye ran the range of store fronts and rested on that of Bumper. There was the center of interest and commotion.

“The mischief!” cried Jack in mingled dismay and excitement, bolting down the stairs on a mad rush, just as Nat Anderson had done scarcely an hour previous.

CHAPTER III

NAT ANDERSON'S TRICK

JACK RANGER bolted down the stairs and reached the yard. He ran across it, cleared its low fence with a nimble spring, and fixed his eyes on the opposite side of the street.

The vivid picture of what he had viewed from the overhead window was sharply photographed on Jack's brain. Nat Anderson was getting his revenge on old Bumper.

Next door to the Palace Dry Goods store a new front was being built out. Braced between two scantlings there Jack had discovered his chum. In his hand Nat held Jack's largest magnifying glass. Posing it so as to focus the direct rays of the hot afternoon sun, Nat slantingly extended it so that these shot under the canvas awning of Bumper's store.

Directly in front of the store window the enterprising Bumper had that morning placed a work of art imported from the city. This was a dummy figure, man-high, wearing a sample of the latest summer coat. The dummy had a wax head. This represented a man with an abundance of wavy hair,

a raven black moustache and a face highly colored with all the shades of pink.

For an hour that morning Bumper had strolled up and down, proudly surveying this magnificent work of art. For about ten minutes, it seemed, Nat Anderson had been giving it a sun bath. The rays filtered through the powerful magnifying glass had produced a fatally — instantaneous effect. Had not Jack's thoughts been diverted by a new complication in the situation at that moment, he would have roared outright at the grotesque and comical picture the dismantled dummy now presented.

The plastic wax had melted. The nose had dripped clear away, engulfing the beautiful moustache, which fell loose, dabbing down into a great hollow fissure in one cheek. One eye looked as if it had dissolved into tears. In fact the smiling, simpering face was a total wreck, a grinning mass of pasty vacuity.

Nat had done his work well, but by the time Jack reached the street he had disappeared. Apparently he had slipped on his perch among the scantlings, the sun glass falling to the sidewalk, where it lay. Perhaps he had been urged to retire by the appearance of Bumper on the scene, for the dry goods man came rushing out of his store just as Jack vaulted the fence.

For the first time Jack noticed a lady standing

near and gazing into the show window. She was so close to the dummy that some of the melted wax had dripped onto the gown she wore. She appeared to be so interested in the show goods that she was not aware of her plight.

Bumper ran out on the sidewalk. He took one horrified glance at the ruins of the dummy. He tore his hair, threw his arms up in the air, uttered a shout of rage, and glared up and down the street, trying to discover a trace of the vandal who had robbed his store of its new attraction.

"That means trouble for me," thought Jack, as the storekeeper discovered the magnifying glass lying on the walk and dove for it. Bumper glared all over it, examined its handle, and then glancing wildly in the direction of the dummy appeared to trace the connection between the two.

At that moment the lady at the show window turned around.

"The mischief!" muttered Jack—"Aunt Angelina! She has got mixed up in this."

Bumper too evidently recognized the elder Miss Stebbings. Usually he was suave and obsequious towards any regular or prospective customer. In this instance, however, the moment he caught sight of the lad's face his own became fairly contorted with rage. He rushed to Miss Angelina and grabbed her roughly by the arm.

"Why, you rascally ruffian!" roared Jack, his

emotions set on springs that sent him bolting across the street like an arrow, his own indignant expression mingling with the words of Bumper, yelled viciously into the ear of his affrighted prisoner:

"Your nephew — Jack Ranger! He did it! The scamp! My beautiful wax figure destroyed! He did it! The scoundrel! His name is burned into the handle of that magnifying glass. I'll have his hide. I'll send him to prison —"

"That will do, Mr. Bumper — so."

Jack Ranger was on fire with wrath, but he acted and spoke coolly, though definitely. He had detached Bumper's grip from his aunt's sleeve with an instantaneous wrist twist that made the storekeeper face about with a howl of sudden pain.

"Oh, I know you," he panted. "Oh, I'll fix you. That's your magnifying glass."

"Why, sure enough it is," assented Jack, deftly snatching it out of Bumper's hand. "Now how did it ever come here?"

"As if you didn't know," snarled Bumper. "You see I was right. He admits it, madam."

"Jack, I hope you have not been guilty of destroying Mr. Bumper's property," quavered his aunt tremulously.

"Not guilty," said Jack with promptitude, moving to his aunt's side and placing a supporting arm

affectionately about her fragile figure, for Miss Angelina was nearly at the point of fainting. "Why, I just came across the road, didn't I? Been working all the morning in that loft over there. I can prove it by witnesses. Alibi in this instance, Mr. Shylock Bumper."

My name isn't Shylock — it's Shadrack," gurgled Bumper, realizing that from Jack's statement he was baffled.

"Excuse me, I'll remember next time," said Jack. "Very well, Mr. Bumper, if you care to test my claim in court, I am at your service. Come, aunt," continued Jack, gracefully offering his arm to the poor, frightened lady. Then facing about with a blazing eye he added to the storekeeper:

"If you ever so much as lay a finger on one of my relatives again, you miserable ruffian, I'll have you carted out of town on a rail!"

Bumper quailed. Some curious pedestrians were approaching. The Stebbings ladies were well-to-do, respected residents. It would not do to hurt his trade by a public street quarrel.

"Go on," he snarled, "get out. You think you're smart! All the same, you're in this trick, and I'll fetch it home to you yet. That head cost five dollars. Some one will pay for it."

"Not I," asserted Jack, and moved away, his

aunt on his arm. Miss Angelina expressed a deep sigh of relief as she got her self-willed nephew beyond the danger of a fracas with the storekeeper.

"Oh, Jack! Jack!" she murmured, "will you ever —"

"Tell a lie?" smiled Jack promptly, "never! Stand by and see you insulted? Again — never. Stop getting mixed up in mischief? I fear not. I had no hand in that little transaction back there, though."

"But —"

"A chum did? Yes. I'll lecture him, aunt. I even think he went a little too far, and he's manly enough to fix the matter up after Bumper fixes him up first for a measly sell he played on him this morning. Don't trade with that man, Aunt Angelina. He came here to locate after busting up bad and cheating all his customers in another town. He has no idea of building up a legitimate, permanent business here — just wants to dupe the people with his 'bargains,' and clean out poor old Babbitt, his business rival. Well, he wont," concluded Jack — "not if I can help it."

They had reached home on the next street by this time. Leaving his aunt safe at her own door step, Jack darted across the garden towards the loft workroom at the rear of the lot.

As he neared the old barn he paused, facing the side street. Perspiring and out of breath, Nat Anderson had just scaled the fence.

"Hello!" he exclaimed staring hard at the magnifying glass in his chum's hand—"where did you get that?"

"Where you dropped it, of course," retorted Jack.

Nat laughed rather sheepishly. He saw that Jack was not entirely in harmony with his latest scheme of paying off an old score.

"See here, Nat," said Jack, "when we get that fifty dollars to-morrow I'd fix up this matter with Bumper, if I were you. A trick's a trick, but —

"I will when he gives me back my seventy-nine cents," observed Nat grimly. "Dingbats and zephyrs! what now?"

Both directed their glances towards the old barn and started quickly for it.

From its upper loft a great outcry arose at just that moment. They recognized the strenuous tones of "Fathead" Farson, bawling out:

"Help! Save me! Help!"

CHAPTER IV

“TREASURE ISLAND”

JACK and Nat were up the stairs and into the work room barn loft in a flash. They guessed from the vigorous outcry they had heard that Archie Farson had got into trouble of some kind.

“There he is. The dub! What ever has he been trying to do?” cried Nat.

Both regarded the object of their attention in some wonder. At one end of the loft was a boxed-in space with a very narrow door. This opened on some very frail and crooked stairs. These had been used to ascend and poke down hay when the barn was originally employed as a stable. Latterly, however, the steps had rotted away in places. Jack had secured the door with a nail. Neither he nor Nat ever thought of coming into or leaving the loft by that unsafe and unnecessary way.

They saw that the door had been wrenched open. Half-way through it, one foot evidently dangling where it had smashed out a step, on a teetering balance, stuck fast, was the fearful-faced and frightened Archie.

His fatness fitted a tight squeeze midway. His waistband was caught behind on a hinge and the front of his work apron on a latch.

"Help!" he gasped, squirming and rattling the door frame with his ineffectual struggles. "I'm squeezed to death. I'm a-goner if I slip, for the steps are broken. Oh, ah — murder!"

"How did you get in this fix? What are you trying to get downstairs that way for?" demanded Nat with suspicion, running up to the imprisoned boy. "Jack, grab and hold his arm. Now then — pull."

Nat loosened the hinge and latch holds from Archie's garments. Then he too gripped the inside arm of the captive. Archie bellowed with breathless fright as they pulled a board clear out of plumb in extricating him from his puzzling situation. He flopped over on a work bench, his big eyes goggling, his flat, flabby face the color of a piece of red flannel.

"Hi! what's that you've got?" demanded Nat quickly, and made a grab at a piece of paper which his keen eyes detected Archie was trying to hide.

"Eh, me? nothing," spluttered Archie, showing guilt and evasion in speech and manner.

"Why, Jack," cried Nat with frowning brows, as he opened the piece of crumpled paper he had secured, "it's our contract with Babbitt. You sneak! what's your game, anyway?"

"What!" exclaimed Jack, truly startled. He glanced at the open sheet in his chum's hand. Then he ran quickly to the inner work room. In his hurry to get to Bumper's fifteen minutes back, he had forgotten to lock its door. A glance within showed his machines and other fixings in disorder. His desk had been ransacked. Jack ran back at Archie with flashing eyes.

"See here," he spoke sternly. "You have been sneaking in among my private papers. You stole that contract Nat just took from you."

Archie got up and slowly backed towards the window, looking sheep-faced but stubborn.

"Yes, and heard us coming," broke in Nat, "and tried to get away with it by that old staircase. Wish we'd let him tumble, the sneak! Let's pitch him through, as it is."

"You'd better leave me alone," snarled Archie, edging along the work bench. "Huh! what have I done? Room was open, wasn't it? door was unlocked. I just looked in. Yes, I just looked in," repeated Archie, breaking into a glee-some chuckle, "and I'm onto your whole scheme, I am!"

"Oh, are you?" purred Nat softly, slowly easing along to get within grabbing distance of the young traitor.

"Yes, you bet!" grinned Archie. "You two have made a contract with Babbitt to advertise him all over the town for fifty dollars. I know how

— Jack has invented a stencil roller. You're going to label the sidewalks from one end of the town to the other. Where they are stone, they stain in and never come out. Where they're wood, they soak in and stick like glue. Oh, you're a good one, Jack Ranger! You're clever all right, ha! ha!"

Jack exchanged an uneasy look with Nat. He nodded his head slightly, a hint that they must promptly squelch the discoverer of their trade secrets. Nat understood. He posed to jump forcibly upon the retreating Archie. But the latter was watchful. He grabbed up a saw lying on the work bench.

"Stand back!" he roared, hacking the air with stupenduous slashes. "I'll hit anything that comes nigh me. You wouldn't let me in on this game. Well, I'm there — with both feet. See? It's unlawful to smear those advertisements all over the town sidewalks. It'll ruin Bumper's trade. All right. If I notify the marshal, he'll stop you. If I tell Bumper and nip your scheme, he'll give me ten, twenty, yes, thirty dollars. I'll do it, if you don't come to terms."

"What terms?" growled Nat Anderson, his fingers tingling to grasp the unblushing traitor by the nape of the neck and roll him down the stairs.

"Well, you can't stop me. I'll fight if you

come a step nearer, I'll blurt it all out from this window. Bumper is outside yonder. Give me a third, or I peach. You've got to make me a partner, or I'll give you away."

Jack found it hard to hold himself in. Nat was muttering hotly under his breath: "Boiling smithereens," "Bulbous Tadpoles," and the like. Jack studied Archie shrewdly. Suddenly he turned to Nat. He looked straight in his face and gave his chum a slow, mysterious wink.

"He's got the bulge on us," said Jack. "Here, put down your saw, we won't tackle you. Let's talk this matter over."

"No, sir!" declared Archie. "I don't disarm myself till I know where I stand. Do I come in as a partner?"

"It's hideous!" remarked Nat bluntly, "but, as said, you've bested us. Yes, I'll agree. You help us to-night, keep your mouth shut, and we'll make you a partner."

"That's a bargain?" demanded Archie skeptically.

"Don't I say so?"

"Then I want Jack Ranger to say so. His word goes with me. If he agrees, I'll feel easy and put down the saw."

On the sly Jack Ranger gave his chum a second significant wink, and said: "All right, let it go

that way," but with a latent something in his eye that might have warned Archie Farson of breakers ahead.

"I'm to be a full partner?" persisted Archie.

"If you report here for duty at midnight," answered Jack in a particularly definite tone, "and help us bill the town, you come in as a third partner on the speculation, yes."

"Good!" cried Archie exultingly, throwing down the saw. "Say, fellows, no hard feelings now. I want to be square. I want to get in, you know."

"You'll be in all right, long before midnight!" muttered Jack under his breath. Then aloud: "Now then, Archie Farson, in for a penny in for a pound."

"Eh?" inquired Archie.

"That's what. If you're in on one deal, you've got to bear the brunt of battle on the whole combination. We're not going to let you grab off a share of that fifty dollars, unless you go in on our five thousand dollar deal, too."

"What? Say! Five thousand?" gasped Archie, pricking up his ears. "What do you mean?"

"Do we let him in on that?" inquired Jack looking Nat in the eye again, and dropping him a suggestive wink for the third time.

"Oh, I suppose so," answered Nat, wondering what his chum was getting at, but trusting him fully on the basis that Jack knew exactly what he was about.

"Oh, say, you must — you will, won't you?" cried Archie, duly tantalized by the impressive mysteriousness of his companions. "What is it?"

Jack rubbed his chin solemnly. He became extremely grave and business-like. He glanced all about the loft as though he feared they would be overheard, and came within confidential earshot of the "third partner."

"See here, Archie Farson," he said, "if ever you give us away, when once we have imparted our secrets to you —"

"You are simply doomed!" interruptingly pronounced Nat, taking up a chisel and feeling its keen edge in a meaning way.

"I wont — honest, I wont!" cried Archie, shivering. "Tell me now."

"Well, then, you know Swamp Island, up the river?" began Jack.

"Of course — been there a thousand times."

"Heard of miser Tyson's secret hoard, I suppose?" continued Jack impressively.

"Why — no — yes, in a way," answered Archie. "There's always been talk of his being

rich when he died, and no one ever found his treasure. Didn't pay any attention to it, though. Dad said it was rot."

"But you have heard the hidden treasure hinted at?"

"As I say, yes. You don't believe there is anything in it, do you?"

"That is to be demonstrated," declared Jack soberly. "Who knows? Look here. About a month ago old Mart Wingham left town to go West. You know he used to drink a good deal. Well, one night, when hardly himself, he blurted out a whole lot about his suspicions that old Tyson had hidden his hoarded gold somewhere about the old house up on the island where he had lived alone for so many years. He estimated that Tyson must have been worth at least five thousand dollars."

Archie's goggle eyes were staring hard, his breath came quick. He rustled as if tingling all over.

"Nat and I have often planned to look the ground over up there," went on Jack. "You want to be a partner? Well, you do a partner's share, then. Your place is nearer the river than ours. You can get a long, heavy rope, shovel, lantern and pick ax, can't you?"

"Sure!" cried Archie. "We've got a garden house full of such."

“I’ll furnish the boat,” continued Jack. “You, Nat, bring some bottles of ginger pop and some lunch. We’ll strike the island about dusk, make our investigations when no one roaming on the river is likely to discover us, and get back here before midnight to bill the town, see?”

“That’s just famous!” gloated Archie, and fell into a glorious daze, rubbing his unctious hands together and grinning all over his face. Jack went into the little room to rearrange his belongings there. Nat followed him.

“Jack,” he whispered hastily but distinctly, “you’re a corker!”

“Sh-h-!” warned Jack. “Don’t let him get side-tracked now. We mustn’t let Archie Farson out of our sight for a second till we land him where we want him!”

CHAPTER V

THE SILENT PARTNER

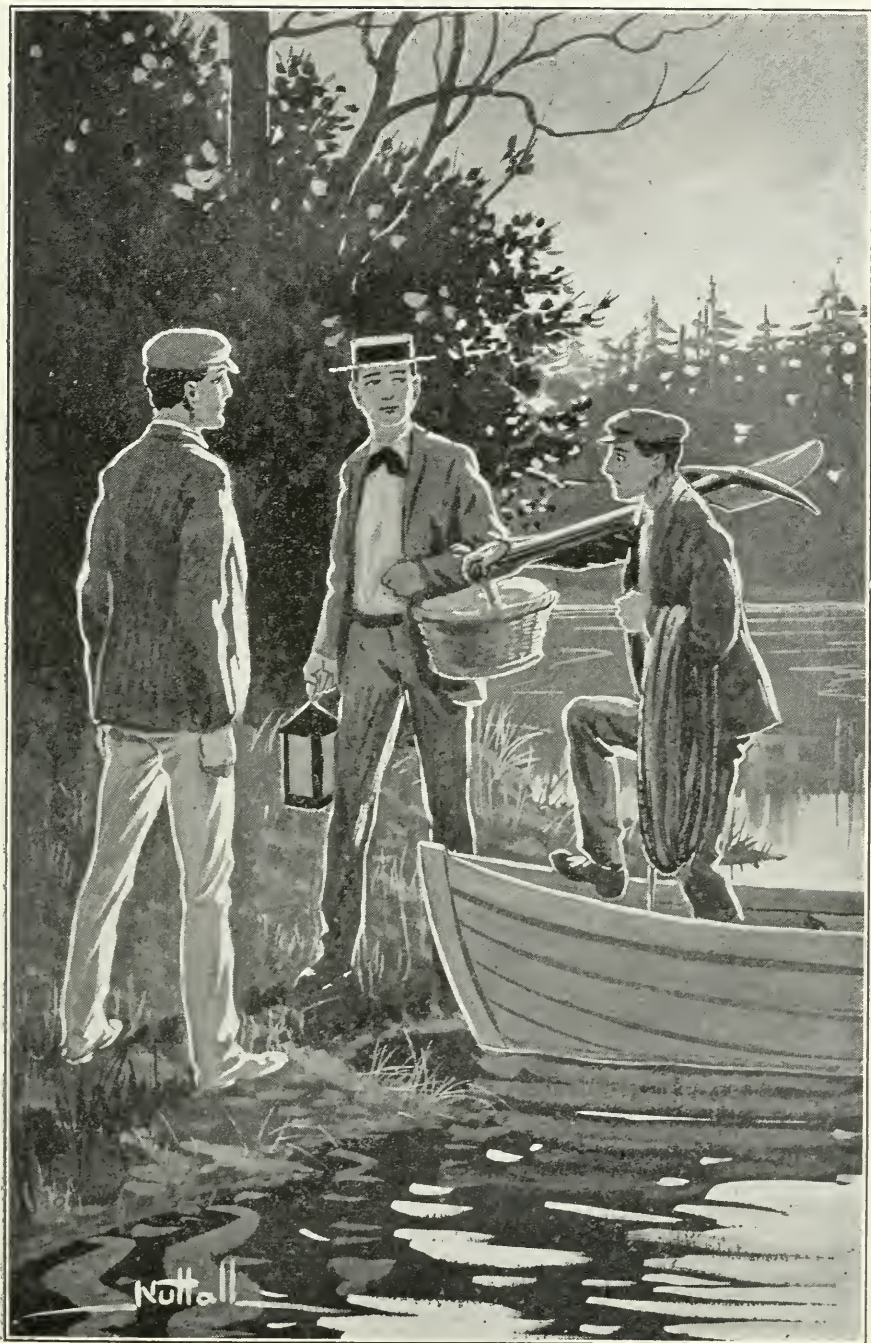
THE SUN was going down as Jack Ranger with sturdy strokes of the oars drove his skiff into the mud on the west shore of Swamp Island. Nat leaped to land first, Jack followed him. Archie arose burdened by a harness of rope, and staggering under the weight of a pick ax and a shovel.

Swamp Island filled the center of the river where it widened out nearly half-a-mile, double that distance from Denton. In its center the land rose slightly.

"Come on," said Nat, carrying a basket and an unlighted lantern. "We'll have a bite before we begin operations."

"Good," chirruped Archie as they reached a roofless and windowless hut, and sat down on a grassy plat in front of it. "I'm hungry as a bear. Say, fellows, I'm glad father and mother are away visiting. It'll be all right my staying out all night now. Say, I suppose there'll be no chance of my getting home before daylight, eh, Jack?"

"I feel pretty sure your duties will detain you



"COME ON!" SAID NAT.—Page 32.

till then," answered Jack in a practical tone, while Nat choked a laugh on a cookie and drowned it with a gulp from the ginger ale bottle.

They managed to dispatch the lunch provided as Nat's contribution to the enterprise. Then Nat filled two of the empty bottles with water from the river, placing them carefully in the basket.

"Well, let's get into action," he suggested, and they entered the old hut. An old trap gaped in the second room of the structure.

"Ugh!" remarked Archie, staring down into the void below. "Dark and muddy, isn't it! What's the scheme, fellows?"

Nat began passing the rope around an exposed joist in the nearest partition. He played one end through the trap till he felt it touch bottom.

"About twelve feet down," he announced in a calculating tone, tying the rope securely about the joist. "You first, Archie," he continued briskly. "Take a slide, and I'll lower the plunder we need on a string."

"Why — you see — oh, certainly, of course," mumbled Archie, shamed out of his cowardice by the look Nat gave him. "The rope's firm? Sure there's no pit or that kind of thing there? Ugh — oh!"

Archie, about as graceful as a cow, lurched

on the rope as he seized it, took a slide and came ker-chunk! on the gravelled bottom of the cellar. Nat took a string from his pocket, secured to it the basket and the lantern, which he now lighted, and lowered them. He dropped his end of the string. Then suddenly he seized the rope and whipped it up to the main floor of the shanty.

"Hey! Say! what you up to?" yelled Archie.

Jack thrust his face over the trap. They could see by the aid of the lantern Archie's fat features in sudden concern.

"Fathead," said Jack, "we are going to leave you here till daylight. There is no way of your getting out of here until we come back. No one will hear you if you make a racket. If you did get out, you can't swim. It's a case of making the best of it and taking things reasonably. You have just had a good, comfortable meal. There's a quart of water in the bottles in the basket."

"And we'll lower the pick ax and shovel if you say so, and you can look for that five thousand dollar treasure," suggested Nat, his face beaming down on the frantic prisoner.

Archie went into a frenzy. He pleaded, he threatened. They reminded him of his past dishonorable treatment of them.

"It's wicked," he sniffled. "Jack Ranger, you lied. You said I should be a partner."

"Provided you reported for duty at midnight," reminded Jack softly. "You be at the old barn on time, and I'll carry out my agreement."

"It's treachery, it's rank treachery!" raved Archie. "I'm a partner —"

"Well, you take it quietly, and you'll be a sort of silent partner, see?" suggested Nat sweetly. "Come on, Jack. We've got business to attend to."

At eight o'clock Jack finished a late supper at home. He spent a pleasant hour in the family sitting room with his aunts, and went up stairs to bed. Jack lay down in his clothes. First, however, he attached to one finger a string that ran from a clock set under the bed. It was a "still alarm" time piece — one of Jack's own invention.

Promptly at eleven o'clock a jerk at his finger aroused Jack. He had a fixed route for getting out of the house without disturbing any of its sleeping denizens. Jack reached the loft work room, lit a dark lantern, and was occupying himself at the two wheeled machines he had manufactured when Nat's brisk tread sounded on the stairs.

"All right, Jack," he announced buoyantly, appearing at the top.

"Coast clear?" inquired Jack, arising from

adjusting to the the cylinders of the machines the pads Archie Farson had soaked with the purple ink.

"Yes, and the night, too. I did some sleuth work on the dark and deadly trail of the town marshal. He's made his rounds. Usually subsides till two A. M. He's at the town hall, hat off, coat off, comfortably smoking his pipe and playing a game of checkers with the lock-up keeper."

"Street clear?"

"Not a soul stirring. No social functions on, and a fine night for sleeping. How they will wake up to-morrow, though! Jack, how do they work?"

"Like a charm. Let me show you," said Jack.

He took the broom and cleared a ten-foot floor stretch of sawdust and other litter. Then putting one of the machines into position he reversed the handle.

Noiselessly the rubber-tired wheels sped along the clear stretch of flooring. One turn of the cylinder — an impression. A second turn, a third, a fourth, and at brief intervals, enclosed in a neat border, there showed a facsimile of two human feet, with the clear-stencilled wording beneath them: "Follow these Footsteps to Fortune."

"Jack, you're wasting a fine genius that the

world is panting for!" declared Nat enthusiastically slapping his comrade on the shoulder.

"The town authorities may think it a fine matter, too," suggested Jack.

"Well, we'll wiggle out of it some way," answered Nat recklessly. "Babbitt will be astonished and delighted. He's a good fellow, and deserves our help. As to Bumper, I think this last even-up will squelch him for good. Ready?"

"Yes. Now understand, Nat: the object is to have all these footsteps lead direct to Babbitt's store."

"Of course."

"Circle street has a dozen side streets, like spokes, leading into it. You take the street farthest east. I'll take the west line. When we have finished all the spoke street, we meet at the north edge of the circle. You go one way, I go the other. We meet in front of Babbitt's store with the job completed, running footsteps innumerable from the two meeting ends directly up to the store door."

"I understand. And keep the machine reversed like a lawn mower while rolling it, and reverse again when you want to print?"

"You've got it. They're light enough to shoulder till we get down to actual work."

Not a sound disturbed the even stillness of the night. As Jack and Nat pursued their routes

three-quarters of a mile apart, neither met a stray pedestrian.

Up one street at the right Jack ran his machine. Nat duplicated the proceeding at the far left thoroughfare. They reversed their machines, retraced their steps, and took the second, the third, the fourth spoke street in turn.

They had started in at precisely twelve o'clock. The town bell clanged out one as they approached each other at the edge of Circle street, which rounding at the street, comprised the business thoroughfare of Denton.

"Whew!" cried Nat, rolling his machine to the curb, joining Jack, and rubbing the profuse perspiration from his brow. "Jack, it almost scares me!"

"Yes," answered Jack, "it's a success, that's sure."

"It's a stayer, too," added Nat. "The town seems to have passed that concrete sidewalk ordinance specially to encourage just such budding genius as ours. One more whirl, and —"

"Nat — split!"

With these words Jack Ranger sprang from the curb where he had been resting. His eyes were fixed down the length of the center spoke street he had just covered.

In the bright moonlight both boys saw a man running towards them at the top of his speed. He

was wildly waving his official cane, and as he spied them he raised his voice:

“Hi! Thunder! Destruction! Halt there, whoever you are!”

At Jack's mandate Nat had sprang to his machine, facing it for the west curve. At the same moment Jack had set his for the reverse course.

“The last lap,” ordered Jack rapidly, “and — run like a whitehead!”

“We've got to,” shouted Nat sturdily, “for it's the town marshal.”

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD HIDE-OUT

JACK and Nat put in the briskest ten minutes of their career. A long purplish trail behind them, they darted each on their set route. They were impelled to active speed by the grim spectre of the law bearing down upon them.

"We'll make it, sure," calculated Jack, glancing back the curve he was following.

Jack thought this because a brief look backwards showed Beggs, the town marshal, arrived at the end of the spoke street. He was stationary now at its junction with the Circle. The official looked one way after the fast-disappearing Nat. Then he shot a glance the other way in the direction Jack had taken. He acted as if laboring under breathless excitement. He waved his cane furiously, and finally selected Jack as the direct object of his pursuit.

Jack soon whirled out of sight. He noted the steady imprint left by the faithful little machine he had invented. It was clear and regular as ever. He struck the west curve of the circle finally, passed one spoke street, two of them, and

made a new spurt. Jack saw the marshal cutting down the last street he had passed, planning to head him off.

"Too late, my good friend," chuckled Jack. "Ah, there's Nat — on time. Now for quick action, and to finish up. Then — for the consequences."

Jack considered these latter lightly. He was in high spirits. His machines were a success. Their contract would soon be completed without a jar. He and Nat, breathless but exultant, met fairly in front of Babbitt's store.

"It's rough, this disfiguring of those nice new walks," said Nat. "Old Bumper will call it 'the trail of the serpent.' I suppose the marshal will lock us up for malicious mischief if he catches us."

"He mustn't catch us, though," declared Jack,

"But," resumed Nat, "it will help Babbitt, it pays off Bumper. It's a stroke of genius — and fifty dollars."

Both now ran their machines so as to create a fan-like mass of footsteps, joining to the two main trails and leading right up to Babbitt's store door.

"Cut for it," advised Jack, as they exactly completed their work. "Keep with me, Nat. There's the marshal."

The town official turned into Circle street. Jack and Nat had a good lead on him. They turned off Center street at the first alley, made a

quick cut and reached Jack's home. Here they lifted the machines over the fence just as the town bell struck two o'clock.

"What's the programme now, Jack?" inquired Nat.

"I'll show you," answered Jack, wheeling the way to a circular piece of wood work set in a corner of the yard. "They must'nt find the goods on us, understand? Now then, dump the machines down there. That's it."

Jack had pulled open the cover of an old dry cistern. They lowered the machines, reset the top, and went up into the barn loft workroom.

"You're not going to snooze here all night, when there's comfortable beds waiting for us at home?" inquired Nat, as his chum stretched himself out on a work bench.

"Not at all," responded Jack readily, "but we'll rest a bit. Then for Swamp Island."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Nat, "that's so. I had forgotten all about Fathead. I suppose we've got to go after him?"

"Oh, sure," said Jack. "He's probably half-dead with horror and loneliness already. I don't think Beggs recognized us, Nat."

"Probably not, but he won't have to do much thinking to connect us with the scrape," retorted Nat.

They rested for about an hour. Jack had a

purpose in this delay. He lay so he could command a view of the house. It would have worried him to see the marshal appear and disturb his aunts.

"Things seem to have settled down — till morning, anyhow," he said at last. "We'll make a cautious break for the river, Nat."

This they did, keeping off the public streets, and taking alleys and cutting across lots.

Dodging across one street, they saw three figures about two blocks away. They assumed that the trio comprised the marshal and two others, viewing the sidewalks and discussing the episode of the night.

Once afloat in Jack's skiff, they were soon at the island. They entered the old hut on tiptoe. Nat glanced down through the open trap and chuckled. Seated on the floor of the cellar with the lighted lantern by his side was Archie Farson. He had his coat off, and it completely enveloped his head so as to shut out sight, sound and all the haunting terrors of loneliness.

"Hi, there!" sang down Jack.

"Murder! Eh? Oh, it's you," growled Archie, staring up with a pale, sullen face. "Say," he continued in a whining tone, "you'll let me out, wont you, Jack Ranger? Oh, my! I've seen rats big as kittens down here. And something has swished, swashed at me all night long. It's old

Tyson's ghost, I know it is. Oh, there it is again!"

"A poor harmless bat," spoke Nat, as flapping wings passed his face. "Here's a rope, Fathead. Fetch up that basket and the lantern with you."

Archie Farson reached the floor of the hut in safety. He scowled at Nat, who was laughing at him. He glanced at Jack with a reproachful, injured air.

"Think you've done something smart, dont you, you fellows?" he snarled. "All right. My turn's coming."

They carried the shovel, pick ax and other traps to the skiff. Jack took the oars, and they landed about two blocks from where Archie lived.

"We'll help you take these traps back, Fathead," said Nat, shouldering the tools.

"You will, or they will stay on the bank till they rot," growled Archie, strutting on unincumbered. Then as they struck a sidewalk his head began to wag curiously from side to side. He goggled at the stencil advertisement plastering the pavement.

As Nat arrived at the fence of the Farson home and tossed the tools over into the yard, Archie directed a spiteful look at him.

"Bet you ain't through with trouble on that smart-Aleck fresco job of yours," he remarked.

"Why not, Archie?" inquired Jack in the pleasantest tone in the world.

"Because I'm going to blab," answered Archie bluntly. "If they don't know who did it I'll tell them."

"You wont, Archie," remonstrated Jack soothingly — "oh, no, you wont. You see, Archie, while we are not exactly partners, we are partners in crime."

"Get out. Who is! How?"

"You," blandly observed Jack. "Who inked those rollers? Why, you did. I don't know much latin, but I remember a famous motto for us three: '*In particeps criminis.*' Look it up in the grammer, and think twice before you peach, Archie."

Archie glared at Jack, but the latter could see that his words had impressed his traitor employee.

"Hold on, Archie, just a minute," he directed, as Archie started slowly for the house. "I owe you a dollar. There's two, to make up for your brief isolation among the gilded splendors of old Tyson's treasure chamber.

Jack took out his pocket book and paid the money, put it up again, and with Nat turned from the scene.

"Think he'll tell?" questioned Nat, as they walked on.

"Oh, he may blunder out something about it, but I'm not scared," answered Jack lightly.

"Then it's home now?"

"Not on your life! I've been thinking we'd better make ourselves pretty scarce till we learn how the situation is panning out. Got your pocket fishing tackle and some matches with you?"

"Both," promptly responded Nat.

"All right, then we'll take the back trail from the skiff and the river, catch a few fish, and have breakfast up at Doane's meadows — our old camping hide out. About noon we'll scout the natives. If things look moderately bland, we'll venture back to civilization. If not, we'll do the gypsy act till this rumpus blows over."

This was decided on. Nat's folks would not worry at his night's absence. The chums alternated at staying together at their respective homes. Nat's folks would know that Nat was somewhere with Jack. While they regarded both as a trifle too frolicsome at times, they liked Jack and knew he would not stumble into any serious trouble.

Jack had free range at home. It was no unusual circumstance for him to arise at daybreak and go for a row or a swim. Sometimes he went off on an all-day jaunt. Missing him that morning, his aunts would not worry as to his safety.

They rowed and floated, caught a few fish, and

just at daybreak moored the skiff at the edge of Doane's meadow. Many a time they had camped at a little spot here, near the river's edge where thick brush shut them into a leafy, cave-like space. Nat had just started a fire and Jack was preparing the fish to broil, when the latter lifted his hand warningly.

Both listened intently. A splash-splash sound came from the direction of the water. Jack parted the leafy screen and peered out at the river.

"Capital!" he said with satisfaction — "the very fellow I wanted to see."

CHAPTER VII

BUDGE

"WHO is it, Jack?" asked Nat Anderson.

"Budge Rankin."

"Oh, him. What can you want of him?"

"You will see presently," answered Jack, making his way from the hide-out and reaching the river bank. Nat joined them there. Both stood silent for a moment viewing a rather peculiar spectacle.

Clad in a very sparse bathing suit and stretched flat on a three-foot plank, was a lad of about fifteen. He was floating on the surface of the stream at random, indolently kicking the water with his heels. Lying comfortably at full length he was chewing gum enjoyably. He would pull it in a long string from his teeth, and then wind it in the strand again like some gawky schoolgirl.

"Hi, there!" sang out Jack sharply.

The early morning swimmer came erect on the float like an automaton. He viewed the two boys with a crisp nod and a keen glance from his twinkling ferret eyes.

"'Smatter?" he shot out, gum chewing curtailing his vernacular at every twist of his ceaseless jaws.

"I want to see you, Budge — a little matter of business. Taking a morning bath, eh?" suggested Jack.

"'Sright," bobbed Budge, using his straddling feet as oars and paddling shorewards. "Feed the chickens at five A. M. Like their company. Going to be a poultry raiser some day. Fivethirty a douse. Came here hafnourgo."

Budge was a new arrival in the village. He was known to Jack as a youth of the tramp type. Jack had first met him sleeping in his skiff, homeless. He had fed him up, gave him some clothes, and at present Budge was doing odd errands for the village print shop. He had taken free lodging in an old barn about half-a-mile up the river, doing occasional chores for its owner. Now he stepped ashore and stood awaiting Jack's further pleasure.

"I'm glad you happened along, Budge," said Jack. "There's something you can do for me, if you will."

"Thasso?— Sure."

"I'll pay you to do a couple of errands for me — you'll have time before you go to work."

"Awgullong — do anything for you for nothing, Jack Ranger."

"I wont have it — that way, Budge. You see, I'm in a little bother up in the town there."

"'Smather now?" propounded Budge, evidently previously fully aware of Jack's mischievous proclivities.

"I'm going to leave that for you to find out for yourself," observed Jack with a shrewd smile. "When you do, drop down this way and give us your opinion of the situation, will you?"

"I maskin frinfirmation," said Budge. "Quit-yerfoolin, and tell me what's doing."

"Well," explained Jack, "there's a gentleman in Denton probably looking for us."

"Oowassy?"

"The town marshal."

"Thattledo — been on a frolic again, then?"

"Put it that way," said Jack. "I'll fix you out in a minute, Budge."

Jack took out his memorandum book. He tore out three leaves, wrote on and folded all of them, addressing two of them, and presented them to Budge.

"Deliver that one to my home, Budge," he said. "The other to Mr. Babbitt at his store. This last one is a list of a few eatables we want. Here's a dollar. Can you do all that before you start at your regular work, and without letting anybody know you have seen us?"

"Betcher life," responded Budge with vim.

"And keep the change, Budge."

"If you insist — thanksawfly. I'll be back soon as I can get action on the notes."

Jack trusted Budge fully. As the latter started for his clothes on a run, the chums resumed the preparations for their breakfast.

The fish were broiled to a turn. They were appetizingly dispatched, and the boys were stretched at full length on the grass, snoozing dreamily, when Budge reappeared. It was now seven o'clock. He carried a parcel in one hand.

"There's the grub you ordered," he reported, "and your change."

"I'm not going to take the change, Budge," said Jack.

"Yartoo."

Jack pushed back the extended hand that held the change. Budge shrugged his shoulders helplessly and pocketed the money. Then his eyes began to snap and twinkle.

"What are you making faces at?" demanded Nat.

"My face, I guess — sonely wunnigot. Say, Jack Ranger," shot out Budge, beginning to grin mightily. "You've woke up the town, sure and simple, this time. Oh, my! Footsteps. Follow —"

"Your fortune? Oh, yes."

"What are you hinting at?" demanded Nat in

mock indignation. "Trying to tack some new insinuation onto us, as if —"

"Shutthermouth — I know."

"You've got your nerve with you, accusing us —"

"Gotchoors. Say, Jack Ranger, you'd think there'd been a snow storm. People out shovelling it off the sidewalks. People scrubbing the cement. People planing the board walks. No go. There to stay. Who did it? Yah! Who got me to send that order to the city printers supply house for that purple ink last week? But I'm mum. And tickled to death — hoo, hoo, hoo! I've got to let it out. Yah — hoo, hoo, hoo!"

"Blithering doormats — the fellow's got a fit!" declared Nat Anderson.

Budge had given way to unrestrained laughter, rolling on the grass, roaring out his bottled up mirth. The tears ran down his cheeks, feet and hands hysterically sawing the air. He finally swallowed his cud of gum, choked on it, and looked sober and alarmed until he had produced a fresh supply from his pockets.

From his incoherent report it seemed that the old town was stirred to its center. Indignant property owners, discovering their disfigured pavements, started on the war path trail to trace the tell-tale footsteps to their source. They ran into each other like explorers in a labyrinth. Spoke

street or Circle, they one and all arrived at the same terminus: Babbitt's store. The average population, however, according to Budge were in a state of stimulating gayety. The indifferent ones called it a clever advertising scheme.

It appeared that there were vague suspicions as to the perpetrators of the act, but no definite evidence as to their identity.

"I wrote my aunts that I was off on a little boating jaunt," said Jack. "I warned Babbitt to stand pat and tell the truth — that he had not the remotest idea that the advertising he had contracted for was to be sidewalk advertising. Nat, I guess we had better lay low for a later report, eh?"

Nat was sleepy, and Nat was agreeable to this proposition. Budge promised to see them again by nightfall. Jack and Nat supplemented the fish lunch with a second breakfast from the provisions Budge had brought. The chums then set at work to make up for the night of sleep they had lost.

Just as sunset their faithful envoy appeared. Budge was chewing gum harder than ever, causing his words to run together with unusual rapidity.

He reported that the storm had subsided. The sidewalk advertising was now taken as a joke by the mass of population. All but Bumper. He had gone rank, raving, stark mad, Budge de-

clared. His glaring red posters on the telegraph poles looked like sick cats compared to the stupendous advertising act of his triumphant rival, Babbitt, to whose store the crowds had flocked all day long.

Bumper had invoked the town marshal to hot and hasty justice. Beggs declined to act unless a sworn and specific charge was made. The baffled Bumper had gone and hired a painter to break the suggestive continuity of "Fortune's Footsteps" by painting them out along his own store front. The painter had daubed the walk with a mixture of grease and white lead. Some of the passing throng had walked on this before it was dry.

Among them, half-a-dozen going into the neat shoe store next door had carried in the wet paint on their soles. They had ruined the shoe dealer's carpets. He ran out to remonstrate with Bumper. The latter was ugly and defiant. Words had led to blows, the shoe dealer had knocked the dry goods dealer through the main plate glass window, landing the unfortunate Bumper amid the wreck and ruin of all his former grandeur.

Mad as a hornet, Bumper had put out a big sign intended to destroy his business rival. He had offered one dollar alarm clocks for twenty-five cents. Babbitt had hired Budge and others for repeated purchases. They had cleaned out Bumper in two hours. At four o'clock a mysterious

stranger arrived at Denton. He went straight to Bumper's store. He was closeted confidentially with Bumper for an hour. Then the store was closed. Bumper had got credit in the city through false statements, and was in danger of being arrested.

All this and much more in the same strain Budge reported with satisfaction.

"I reckon it's safe to go after that fifty dollars now," suggested Nat. "Poor Bumper! we only helped grease his slide to a downfall. He was headed alright before we did any damage. All right. I'll act square. He can have his pay for that wax dummy as soon as he hands me over my seventy-nine cents."

Secretly Jack was glad that their most distinguished recent exploit promised to pass into history without involving them in trouble. He looked a little serious as he said:

"We had better take a quietus for a spell, Nat. Some day we'll hit a rock."

"Pink grasshoppers! what now?" shouted Nat, as herewith Budge broke out into a long, uproarious guffaw.

"Zifyoucould!" spluttered Budge. "You fellows give up fun. You'd find a way to play tricks on a desert island, you would. Jack Ranger, please don't reform till I tip you off the brilliant chance of your life."

"Eh — how's that? What?" demanded Nat, pricking up his ears.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Budge. "You want fun? Then there's an opportunity come up that will set you wild with joy."

"Guess I want a rest from the arduous labors in the mischief line," declared Jack gravely.

"Guess you don't," differed Budge bluntly — "nix, not, also no, when I tell you something. Say, you fellows ever hear of Professor Marinello Booghoobally?"

"Never," answered Nat for both.

"Nor 'The Function of the Cult'?"

"No," answered the two chums in a breath — and expectantly.

"Then I'll tell you. Heads together. On the Q. T. Listen."

In a low, whispering tone Budge imparted what he had to tell. Slowly Jack Ranger's lips relaxed. Surely they broadened into a grin. It was followed by a deep-down chuckle.

"Samson's toothpicks!" shouted Nat Anderson, jumping two feet in the air and kicking his heels together — "the joke of the century. Say I'm in it — clear up to the neck!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

"ROLL call. All here? Nat Anderson."

"Present. Wouldn't miss it for a farm."

"Jim Lane, Mort Davis, Aleck Dawes, Pete Ruggles — list complete. Thanks for your promptness, gentlemen. Now then, to elect a chairman — or rather spokesmen — for the committee."

"Not necessary," declared Aleck Dawes. "You suggested this thing, you pilot it through, or it's no go."

"Correct," nodded Jim, Mort and Pete simultaneously — "unanimous!"

"All right, fellows, I'm willing to assume the burden," observed Jack Ranger pathetically. "Find a seat, all of you, and we'll proceed to go into details."

The group was gathered in the old barn loft, as likely a looking sextette of wide-awake, fun-loving comrades as any up to date town could turn out.

It was three days after Jack's advertising freak. That event had passed into local history leaving

Jack and Nat scathless. They had collected the fifty dollars and were diligently enjoying its expenditure.

Bumper had "busted up higher than a kite," as Budge Rankin put it, and Babbitt was happy and prosperous. Jack's aunts and Nat's parents had become fully aware of the share taken by nephew and son in the decoration of the village pavements. So had pretty nearly everybody else in town. The appearance of the two conspirators, however, at all times produced a smile, so there seemed to be no depth to the hard feelings at first aroused.

Jack's vaguely expressed determination to reform and settle down had gone all to pieces, after listening to the tempting discourse of Budge Rankin up at the hide-out at Doane's Meadows. What Budge had whisperingly suggested buzzed like bees in Nat Anderson's restless head until he got his comrade as enthused as himself.

The present meeting in the old barn was the first tangible step in what Budge had declared to be "the joke of the century." Jack's guests now disposed themselves comfortably on workbenches, upturned kegs and sawbucks. Jack himself made a rostrum of an old soap box.

"Fellows," he said, "before vacation at the Academy here, they used to call us 'the old guard'?"

"How's that?" snickered Pete Ruggles, feigning deafness and making an ear trumpet of one hand—" 'Hold Hard?' Yes, that's what we did with the door knob of Professor Winchell's laboratory the day Nat invited the billy goat in to browse on the 'disorderly conduct' register."

"An opportunity has come up to sustain our reputation and strike a blow at frand," went on Jack in a mock heroic tone. "At the academy we soon squelched or cured the snobs and bullies. Last week Nat and I helped unmask and banish a dishonest tradesmen. Fellows, we are now on the trail of a new victim—I should say, subject."

"Who is he?" came the uproarious demand.

"A fakir of the first water."

"Name! name!"

"Professor Marinello Booghoobally. I see you know who he is," said Jack, observing a certain recognition in the faces of his auditors. "That is, you know what the paper says about him: From India, was a high-up Brahmin, theosophist, mad mullah, or something of that sort. travels about the country lecturing and demonstrating on what he calls the Function of the Cult."

"Read about him," nodded Aleck Dawes.
"Teaches people that all the marvelous tricks done

in India are fanciful materializations. Theory is: eliminate fear, and you can sleep safely with tigers, and use cobras like clothes lines."

"Exactly — teaches it for fifty cents a head in a public hall, and ten dollars for a private demonstration. Well, his right name is Hemp Smith, and he was originally a ten-cent museum usher. Budge Rankin says he ran across him at another town. The professor got all the spare cash there was lying around loose, hoaxed everybody, and jumped the town owing for board, laundry and printing. What galls me personally, is that he has interested my aunts. They give him a reception day after to-morrow. Next day he lectures in public. Fellows, I propose to give him an initiation, a sort of private soiree, this afternoon, myself. I sent for you to help me."

"We're here," chirped Jim Lane eagerly — "unroll your plans and specifications, Ranger."

"All right," said Jack. "First and foremost, I want the last one of you to appear here at four o'clock, dressed up in your very swellest togs."

"Kid gloves, white ties, patent leathers and all," put in Nat.

"We," resumed Jack, "are supposed to represent the erudite, dignified and highly cultured pick of the Academy. Impress the professor with this fact, that's your share. Leave the rest to me. After our call we'll get busy — fast."

The business men of Denton stared hard at four o'clock that afternoon as a strictly proper and solemn procession passed down Circle street. It consisted of Jack and his five friends.

Six neat cards were sent up to the professor's room at the hotel. A few minutes later six correctly grouped guests faced that individual. He looked surprised, but pleased. Such a well-appearing delegation could not fail to attract attention and advertise him.

The professor had a shifty eye, a ferret nose, wore a preposterous moustache and pompadour, and dressed like a man with the store clothes habit. He was bland and brassy.

"Ah," he observed, viewing cards and visitors alternately, "to what am I indebted for this unexpected, but believe me most welcome visit, young gentlemen?"

"Professor," announced Jack, with superb poise, "we are a committee representing the psycho-metaphysical class of the Denton Academy."

"Oh, indeed. Yes, yes — I see," smirked the professor, a trifle uneasy at the big words. "An honor, believe me. As a theosoft way up on the classics of — of Oriental mystics, I am delighted to meet you.

Jack saw that the fellow was an ignoramus, with a patter he peddled out by rote.

"You see," he went on dauntlessly, "we have

studied considerably on the ethics of materialization, transmogrification and platitudinary incarnation. That's all theory, though, so we have ventured to approach you, a past grand master in such things, for a practical demonstration."

"Well, I'm a culter right enough," declared the professor. "I plainly prove that fear and imagination are the stumbling blocks to a right knowing of cults, see? For example: What is that? My open hand — empty. 'Taint. A egg. Presto! Empty again."

The professor with prodigious snickering performed a cheap trick that Jack had seen done quite as successfully by amateur prestidigitateurs a score of times.

"Wonderful!" bawled Jack's companion quintette with an unanimity and unction that almost made the professor suspicious.

"I can grow flowers. I can turn fruit into birds," announced the professor, getting chesty with a cheap pride. "That is, I appear to. Demonstration of imagination, haint it?"

"It is," nodded Jack with a side wink at his partners in crime. "Now as to fear, Professor —"

"Ah, there's my strong hold — there's where I am a real and original culter. I don't know fear. Eradicate fear from your life, and you have reached the apix."

"Professor, that's a grand theory," declared

Jack encouragingly. "The whole town knows you are a fearless man. Now you can just make yourself solid here by a demonstration I have to suggest."

"Bring her on," smiled the professor. "I can banish any form of fear with my theory."

"Well, Professor," proceeded Jack, "I suppose you know that Denton, like most other towns, has its haunted house?"

"Eh?" ejaculated the professor, with quite a start. "No, I didn't, but — go on."

"Well, we have — the old Myrick homestead. The owner died about a year ago. They say he was once a buccaneer, and was haunted by all kinds of grisly crimes. Anyhow, he was a queer, lonesome character. The house fell to a nephew. He moved in one Monday, and moved out the next Saturday."

"Ah — um," nodded the professor, trying to treat the matter as a most commonplace subject, but twisting his moustache uneasily.

"He leased it to a friend. Friend stayed a month. Then he moved out. It leaked out that those two had kept mum for policy's sake, and that the place was haunted. People passing by saw queer lights, heard wild shrieks."

"Imagination, pure, unadulterated imagination," proclaimed the professor magnificently, but with a perceptible quaver in his voice.

"A tramp slept there one night. Next morn-

ing he ran through the town, crazily bellowing out that the old place was a nest of horned demons."

"Fear, fear," purred the professor, keeping on his cast-iron smile, but looking restless—"simple, childish fear."

"All right—I say so, too," observed Jack. "Now, we hope to induce you to pass to-night in that house."

"Eh? Pass the night—I see. Just so. Why—yes. We'll do it—"

"No, Professor, not we," interrupted Jack deliberately—"you. We've tried it. The spirits scare at a group. You—alone."

"M—m!" mused the professor vaguely—"have I an engagement to-night? Let me see?"

"If you are averse to the task," said Jack, "there's a man down at Greensboro who has said he will come on and lay the boldest ghost that ever walked."

"No—no!" cried the professor in hot haste. "Greensboro? Certainly not. Me afraid? You insult me! Good, young gentlemen, very good. I shall be delighted—I fairly yearn to get into that haunted house."

"You do it, Professor," said Jack, "and demonstrate your theory, and we'll meet you with a band of music in the morning, and pack your lecture."

Greensboro, Jack had known, was a name to

conjure by. That was the town, according to Budge, that Professor Marinelli Booghoobally, alias Hemp Smith, had "jumped."

The professor strutted about in a disturbed way as Jack arranged the details of calling for him at nine o'clock, and escorting him to the haunted house. He began to see the business side of the enterprise, however, and maintained a bold front as he bowed his visitors from the room.

Down the street the six paraded, spick and precise. They dropped their dignity and broke ranks only when they reached the barn loft rendezvous.

"Now then, you fellows," cried Jack with spirit, "get busy."

"I'll have the phonograph here in an hour," announced Nat.

"And you the megaphone, Jim," ordered Jack briskly. "You fetch that bowie knife relic of yours, Aleck. Mort, your share is the red fire."

"And mine the clock works," chimed in Pete Ruggles.

"Put on your oldest duds," reminded Jack. "There's lots of cobwebs and old plaster up there. Meet here at seven, sharp. Then — for the haunted house."

CHAPTER IX

A LIVELY ORDEAL

"GET off my head, will you!"

"How did I know it was your head? Took it for that old football we saw kicking around here."

"Got the wire all connected, Jim?"

"Sure, Pete. Is this the hole where we drop the deadly knife?"

"Correct. Don't disturb that phonograph, fellows. It's placed just right. I'm hoarse with the blood-curdling shrieks I've poured into it. S—st! Lay low. Some one just struck the walk outside."

Following out Jack Ranger's programme, these four trusty, willing cohorts sat in darkness on the floor of an upper apartment in the deserted Myrick homestead. It was directly above the living room of the house.

All that Jack had suggested the faithful quartette had carried out. It was Jack leading the way for two others up the steps of the house that had warned his friends to silence.

"We've arrived, Professor," announced Jack to Nat's companion.

The professor nodded silently. He had not said much during the trip from the hotel. As Jack unlocked the front door he held back until his guide had lighted a candle in the dark entry.

"Now, if you will follow me," suggested Jack jocularly, "I will show you to your room."

"Pleasant dreams," said Nat. "Here is an extra candle, Professor, in case that one burns out. We are to call at five o'clock."

"I — I thought you said four," observed the professor, gloomily surveying the barn-like room into which Jack had ushered him.

Jack Ranger had managed to get the key to the house from a friend who was a son of the renting agent. He had found time to fix up the room. A ghastly print of "the Demons of Rum," with the demon sitting on a flaming barrel waving a pitchfork, graced the mantel piece. The room had one chair. Its ceiling was festooned with cobwebs. Two tattered screens shut off two corners of the place.

The professor shivered as if he was cold. However, he tried to rally and show a courageous front as Jack and Nat closed the door on him, slammed the front one, and were out of the house.

"Now then — hustle," ordered Jack to his comrade.

They proceeded to lift clear of the supporting posts the whole movable top of the front porch. In its place flat on the ground they placed a shallow horse-trough, half full of water.

"He won't look where he's going when he leaves this house," predicted Jack. "If it wasn't for Aunt Angelina I'd have a crowd here and run him out of town. She's paid him for the reception to-morrow night, though, and I want her to get the worth of her money."

"Which she will?" propounded Nat with a grin.

"It's likely," assured Jack with a chuckle. "Now then, I hope those fellows up stairs make no blunder. This way, Nat."

"For our private box, eh? Jack, it's jolly."

Two windows of the living room were boarded up tightly. One pane was broken, not quite to the top. About ten feet from the house was a tree in which a platform had been built. On this Jack and Nat seated themselves.

"Good view," commented Nat with satisfaction. "The professor is interesting himself, Jack."

They watched the inmate of the haunted room fidget about. The first thing he did was to turn to the wall the face of the hideous picture decorating the mantel piece.

Then he lit the spare candle. Even this additional light did not serve to fully illuminate the

high ceilings of the gloomy apartment. The professor cut both candles in two, and now had four lights going on the mantel.

He took out a cigar and lighted it. This seemed to steady his nerves. They noticed his face grow less perturbed. In fact, the professor smiled quite comfortably as he sank into the one chair with which the place was provided.

"Show commences," whispered Nat to his companion.

The cigar suddenly dropped from the professor's lips. He gave a violent start, and whirled about in his chair as though stung. His neck craned, his pose strained, he stared darkly, suspiciously at one of the screen-crossed corners of the room.

"Pull off the wire. Fellows making that old black cambric rustle," observed Jack.

The professor arose slowly to his feet. He started for the dark corner, paused half-way across the room, hesitated, went back and got a candle, and again advanced.

A glance over the top of the screen made him shudder — the watchers from the tree could observe this. There was nothing behind except some old black cambric. Its sable hue, however, its mysterious rustling, unnerved the professor.

"Wait till he gets a hail from the other corner," suggested Nat.

"He's got it immediately," announced Jack.

A faint groan proceeded from the corner in question, just as the professor resumed his seat.

He arose as if he had sat down on a tack. He went through his previous timorous manœuvres. His face was quite anxious as he peered over the screen. It was white as chalk as he jumped back with a cry that reached the watchers distinctly.

Jack smiled. They had smeared the corner behind the screen with red ink. The professor made a dive for his hat. Then he seemed to realize that flight would imperil his business prospects. He twisted his moustache nervously.

Suddenly his face brightened. He had taken off the light summer overcoat he wore and had hung it up on a nail behind the hall door. This he approached, and with an expectant face dove his hand into first one pocket and then the other. Something there he missed. He groaned audibly, a sickly expression crossed his face and he sank to the chair in a state of nervous collapse.

"What's that manœuvre, now?" asked Nat, quite puzzled.

"Oh, he was only looking for what he'll soon get in another form," replied Jack.

"And that is?"

"Spirits. I saw him slip a flask into his pocket to keep up his courage as we left the hotel. Well, I lifted it. Dropped it over a convenient hedge — uncorked."

“Rocks and riddles!” interrupted Nat —
“hear them.”

A hideous yell rang out — shot down through a hole in the ceiling. The professor did not know this, for the fearful outcry appeared to pervade all the space in the apartment.

It was followed by yells, sobs and moans. A gruff, murderous tone seemed mingled with feminine shrieks. Then, as the affrighted professor shrank and trembled from head to foot, a glittering object dropped through space — a knife. It struck the floor and quivered there.

The professor uttered a scream, he rushed towards his hat and coat. Through a hole in the ceiling there suddenly poured down a blinding stream of red. It seemed to envelope everything in a glow of blood. Awful screams succeeded.

“Get down, quick — the finale,” ordered Jack, dropping to the ground out of the tree. Nat followed him. They ran to the front of the house.

“Help. Oh, ah!” Splash!

The professor had burst open the front door to land in the watering trough. He arose, bruised and dripping. Hatless and frenzied, he struck out for the street. He took its middle, a nimbly-sprinting figure, desperate, appalled, frightened fairly out of his wits. Nat held to a post and roared. Jack laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

His confederates soon joined him. Excitement and jollity made them a noisy crowd as they made for the more settled center of the village.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when they parted on Circle street to repair to their respective homes. Jack had two squares to go alone after leaving Nat. He found the thoroughfare quite deserted.

Jack, about to cross the street, drew back in a doorway, as he noticed a suspicious-looking character lurking at the entrance to an alley. He peered from his shelter to observe him steal down the pavement. He disappeared in a doorway.

"He's a stranger," mused Jack. "Had something in his hand that glinted like a weapon or tool. Aha!"

Crash! The sound of falling plate glass followed a hard metallic tap, and Jack Ranger darted from covert in the direction of the ominous sound.

CHAPTER X

THE MIDNIGHT BURGLAR

AT a glance as he came into the full open Jack saw that the man he had observed prowling about, had burglarized Moore's jewelry store.

A great hole gaped in the plate glass window.

Moore kept two electric lights going all night, one before his safe, the other in the show window. This latter now showed to Jack the burglar reaching his arm far in through a jagged aperture in the pane.

"Hold on, there!" challenged Jack, rushing boldly up to the thief just as the latter secured and pocketed something.

The burglar turned quite leisurely. He darted a searching glance up and down the street and opposite. Then he looked at Jack, retreating somewhat, for Jack had seized his arm.

"That'll do," he observed quietly, "only — drop it. Make an outcry, and I'll shut off your wind."

"You are a thief, a burglar," said Jack. "You shan't get away."

"Son," spoke the burglar, lifting his free hand simply, "let go."

"No, I won't," asserted Jack strenuously.

The man had brought a revolver barrel right up against Jack's breast. The latter could not help quiver. He still, however, held on to the fellow's arm.

"You're clear grit, I must say," half-laughed the stranger. "You've probably got sense, though — your eye shows that. I don't want to hurt you, but I've got to make my get-away. One — two. When I make it three I'll pull the lever."

Jack read his man. He certainly meant what he said. Perforce Jack dropped his hold of the captive's arm. Just then a light showed in an upstairs window opposite where a tradesman lived above his store.

"That's better," observed the burglar, bracing for a run. "Don't follow, though. It'll be a risk. Friendly collision, that's all. Forget it."

"You have forgotten something," said Jack; "I have seen your face, and, trust me, I'll remember it."

"So-long, son. High time. I'm off."

As the man dodged across the street and down an alley, Jack ran to the curb. He seized a big paving stone and rushed at the door next to the jewelry store.

This was the barber shop. Jack knew that its



THE MAN HAD BROUGHT A REVOLVER BARREL RIGHT UP AGAINST JACK'S BREAST.—Page 74.

proprietor slept all night on the premises. He banged and battered at the door, meantime howling at the top of his voice:

“Wake up — burglars!”

The window opposite was thrown up. A white-robed form appeared.

“What was that crash?” shouted down the voice of Boscombe, the grocer.

“Burglary,” said Jack. “Got a telephone upstairs there?”

“No.”

“Then hurry down into your store and notify the town hall. Sam,” continued Jack as the barber opened the door of his shop, sleepy-eyed and amazed, “get dressed, quick. Go and tell Mr. Moore his store has been burglarized. I’ll stay on guard.”

Jack’s briskness soon produced an effect. The immediate neighborhood was promptly aroused. Jack told his story to the town marshal and Mr. Moore when they appeared on the scene, and with them entered the jewelry store.

“Why, it’s queer,” declared the jeweler, after a hurried inspection of the premises, “but there isn’t an article missing.”

“That seems incredible,” said Beggs, the town marshal.

“See for yourself. A funny burglar! All he had to do was to reach for that tray of silver

watches. There's those rings in the window, too."

"Then he must have been scared away. Good for you, Ranger! Describe the fellow again, will you?" said Beggs.

Jack did so, and the official departed to spread a dragnet for the culprit through assistants and 'phone and telegraph.

"I was wrong," suddenly fell on Jack's ear as the marshal left, and he saw the jeweler, who had resumed his investigations, turn a slightly troubled face from his work bench near the window.

"Discovered something, Mr. Moore?" asked Jack.

"Yes, I have. Too bad! I'd rather loose a hundred dollars in store stuff than ten cents belonging to customers. Why, Ranger — happen to think of it, this comes home to you."

"What comes home to me?" inquired the puzzled Jack.

"There's only one article missing — a ring. I had mended it and placed it just at the edge of my work table. It's gone."

"That must have been what I saw the thief pocket, then," said Jack. "Was it valuable, Mr. Moore?"

"I fear so, both intrinsically and as a relic. Ask your Aunt Angelina, though."

"What has my Aunt Angelina got to do with it?" projected Jack.

"It was her ring. She brought it to me yesterday morning and wanted me to be very careful of it. A stone had come loose — one of a dozen set around a monogram center —"

"Why," interrupted Jack, "I've seen it — a dozen times. Say, she does prize that ring, Mr. Moore. I'm afraid you're in hot water this time."

"See her, Ranger — break the news gently to her, will you?" asked the jeweler in a distressed tone. "Tell her we will ransack the country for that thief."

"Queer he sought out that ring among all this rich plunder," mused Jack, and after waiting around till the broken window was boarded up and the crowd had disappeared, he went home.

Right after breakfast Jack joined his aunts in the family sitting room.

"Aunt Angelina," he said, "I've got something to tell you. I didn't want to disturb you before breakfast. Mr. Moore, the jeweler, had his store burglarized last night."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Miss Angelina with a gasp of anxiety.

"Yes, and the only article stolen was a ring — one you left there to be mended yester —"

Aunt Angelina dropped her knitting. She uttered a scream, called for one sister in an agitated tone, for the other sister in a despairing one, and went into violent hysterics.

"Seems to me this is a pretty big hubbub over a simple ring," observed Jack, as at the end of ten minutes Miss Angelina was restored to something approaching normal quietude.

No one answered him. Aunt Angelina looked as if she had received a shock not easily forgotten. Aunts Mary and Josephine conversed in tremulous whispers, casting cautious, significant glances at Jack.

"If there is a mystery here, I'm old enough to learn what it is and interest myself to help you," suggested Jack, a trifle nettled at all this secretiveness.

"Oh, no! no! no!" gasped Aunt Angelina in a very frightened tone. "Sisters, not a word. Go about your pleasures, Jack. We will hope that Mr. Moore may recover the ring."

"And I could help him," declared Jack. "Why, I had a clear look at the burglar in the bright electric light."

"You — you saw him?" uttered Aunt Angelina, turning pale and trembling all over.

"Sure, I did. I could draw his face to a T — keen, odd-shaped eyes. And nose — hooked. No, not hooked — double-hooked, that is, nature

or an accident seemed to have put a seam right down its center."

"Oh, Mary! oh, Josephine!" screamed Aunt Angelina wildly—"it's the man!" and then she went off in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XI

SCHOOL PLANS

"BLITHERING EVERYTHING!" muttered Jack as he was shut out of the room a few minutes later. "There's some mystery here, that's sure. There always has been about that ring. Those three good souls are scared at something connected with it, and worse scared for fear I'll find out what it is. If there's a chase after the burglar I'm in it, that's all. I've got to find out what all this mystery means."

There was no chase after the singular night marauder, however, for the town marshal failed to find the slightest trace of him. At noon Jack found his aunts as calm and collected as ever. Aunt Josephine took him aside and begged of him never to revive the subject of the stolen ring again, as it worried poor Angelina.

Jack left them all busy preparing the parlors for the seance of Professor Booghoobally that afternoon. They had invited a coterie of lady friends. This recalled to Jack that he, too, had some preparations to make concerning this same "Function of the Cult."

Nat Anderson and he met shortly. For about an hour, after bribing the hotel steward, they hung around the professor's room. During that individual's temporary absence Nat helped Jack through the transom. Jack reappeared minus a little pasteboard box he had carried into the apartment.

"Fixed?" questioned his accomplice with a grin.

"For keeps," answered Jack. "Let's see: the 'function' is on for three o'clock. We'll slip into the house and post ourselves about ten minutes before the performance begins."

Professor Booghoobally arrived at the Stebbings home fearfully and gaudily made up. He carried a satchel. This he placed behind a screen which he had requested to be thrown across one corner of the room.

About twenty ladies were present as guests of Jack's aunts. The professor finally took up his position behind a little stand. He explained his theory: Imagination was the cause of all misguided esoteric systems, fear their bane.

"For instance," he stated airily, "I get my fez, a present from the Calif of Bagdad by the way," and he reached behind the screen, secured it, and tried to look "oriental" as he set it on his glossy raven locks. "I will remove it. Imagine, if you

please, strings of beautiful roses pouring from this fez. Ah, yes."

"Ah, no!" whispered Jack with a chuckle to Nat, who was writhing with suppressed hilarity, both hidden behind convenient draperies.

In vain the professor stroked the fez, touched it with a magic wand, "incanted" it. Its paper contents Jack had removed at the hotel.

"I regret," observed the professor, with difficulty regaining his "front," "but there is some disturbing element present."

Everybody glanced at Mrs. Matilda Green, the local exponent of womans' rights. She was amazonian in proportions. The professor looked uneasy as he noted the skeptical smile on her strong-minded face.

"However, truth will avail over fallacy," continued the professor. "We have here"—he reached behind the screen—"a paper cone. I fancy it to be a cornucopia of birds. There will fly out and return four beautiful canaries. Oh, yes."

"Oh, no!" again reported Jack. "I say, Nat—bedlam!"

The professor's trick birds were back at his room at the hotel. Jack had removed them from the cone. He had replaced them with something else.

That something else dropped from the cone as the professor removed its bottom — mice. Two, four, six, eight of them. With a squeal they hit the floor, with a hollow groan the professor suspected the source of the mysterious substitution, and thought of the arch conspirators of the haunted house episode.

In one palpitating second of time the room became a pandemonium. Feminine shrieks and screams rent the air. Miss Angelina gathered up her ample skirts and leaped to a chair. Her sisters sprang to a sofa. As the frightened mice scurried about, two women jumped to the top of a table. One hysterical lady sprang right out through the open window to the garden.

Four went into hysterics, and two fainted dead away. Mrs. Matilda Green, clutching a creeping monster under her skirt, walked up to the professor and deliberately slapped him in the face, with the crushing words:

“ Imposter — brute ! ”

Jack and Nat thought it best to make themselves scarce before they were discovered. They lurked in the shrubbery outside long enough, however, to witness the professor come down the front steps. He acted as though fired from a cannon, making for the hotel in a state of wild exasperation.

The boys took a row on the river. When they

parted, it was to particularly agree upon a very important "session" in the old barn loft at eight o'clock.

Jack knew from the faces of his aunts as he joined them at the tea table that they were aware of his agency in the episode of the afternoon. Aunt Angelina looked very prim and business-like. Once, with a significant glance at Jack, she alluded to the fact to her sisters that "Judge Bennett was looking remarkably well."

The judge was the family lawyer. More than once the aunts had called him into conference to pass on some of Jack's escapades.

"Something's working," mused Jack, as he observed a tear trickling down Aunt Mary's face, and caught Aunt Josephine laughing behind her napkin.

This conviction was strengthened as, about seven o'clock, Nat joined him at the barn loft rendezvous, appearing on the scene with a fully serious expression on his face.

"I say, Jack," he observed, "something's up."

"Eh? Why, Nat, I was just going to make that announcement myself."

"Was? Then let us compare notes. What's your basis?"

"Aunt Angelina appears to have been to see Judge Bennett to-day."

"It dovetails!" cried Nat. "Judge Bennett was up to see my father this afternoon.

"Then we are — discovered!" announced Jack in a mock sepulchral tone.

"Is it possible?" demanded Nat, with an injured air, "that some enemy has been undermining us?"

Then they winked solemnly at each other and extended and grasped hands.

"Well, they are certainly planning to remove one of us, or banish both from the present scene of our activity."

"Would it work if they did, Nat?"

"Not if we were together — green fields and pastures new, you know."

They grinned, looked mutually wise, and again shook hands. At that moment Budge Rankin came up the stairs. He carried a square bundle under one arm, a pail of paste and a brush in the other hand. He was chewing gum as usual.

"Gotschoorstuff," he announced in a business-like way.

"I see you have," nodded Jack. "Soon as the stores close up we will proceed on our diabolical mission. Now if the judge isn't bent on a writ of injunction, we'll wind up in a final hurrah, Bulletin No. 2, on Professor Booghoobally's famous lectures. Budge, let's see your handiwork."

"'Reginal there,'" reported Budge, producing a poster from his pocket. "Revised edition," denoting a printed sheet tied on top of the bundle he had brought.

The first sheet was a sample of about five hundred posters put up on town fences and bill boards that morning. It announced that Professor Booghoobally's third incarnation of the Ahkama of Bramaputra would lecture on the Function of the Cult the next evening.

The sample of the second edition, which Budge had struck off surreptitiously late that afternoon, called it the "Fakir" of the Cult, and had it that the "Professor" was the third reincarnation of "Hemp Smith, of Greensboro."

"It will be a squelcher," predicted Nat. "Well, Jack, at a possible block in our mad career we have one grand, glowing consciousness.

"What's that?" asked Budge incredulously.

"We never bother the weak, hardly ever the purely gullible. Naming our recent victims: the professor, Bumper, Fathead Farson, I think you'll agree they all three needed trimming. Pilot the way, Budge. You put up those 'reginal' posters. We want to cover the last one of them with the revised edition."

They did bill poster's duty by turns during a two hours' tramp from one end of the town to the other. If his mishaps at the seance had not al-

ready decided the fake professor to abandon his lecture, a glance at his posters in the morning certainly would.

Jack pressed some spending money on Budge, who offered it back for the privilege of having a share in "the next jamboree." Nat was to stay at Jack's house that night, so they went home together.

"Tread lightly," advised Jack as he let himself into a side door with a latch key. "I make it a rule never to announce any extra late arrival."

They groped their way to the dining room. Jack told Nat to stand still till he went to the pantry and got something to nibble at before they retired.

"Struck a dish of doughnuts," his voice sounded a minute later. "Um! Good, fat ones. Aunt Angelina's primest, bless her dear old soul — whoof!"

Steady-nerved Jack made an actual jump. Nat Anderson uttered a fully surprised cry. Then both stared hard. Jack's hands, each finger ringed with a doughnut, outspread like fans.

A flood of light had suddenly filled the room. All Jack's stealthy care had gone for nothing. Aunt Angelina had just turned on the electric light button. She stood beside it, regarding the astonished boys with a severe face.

Seated in retired corners of the apartment, Aunt

Mary and Aunt Josephine greeted the foragers with bland smiles. The table was set as if for a meal. It was piled with goodies. Aunt Angelina leaned over and touched the call bell. The serving maid, prim and aproned, though grinning, came in as naturally as though it were six o'clock tea, instead of a midnight surprise.

"Glittering nabobs!" muttered Nat Anderson under his breath.

"Thunder!" echoed Jack, thinking hard and guessing harder, "this means something." Then, aloud: "Aunt Angelina, this is something of a surprise."

"Why, Jack," responded the good old creature in her gentlest way, "we thought we would sit up for you and treat you to a farewell supper."

"A what?" faltered Jack, looking askance.

"Yes, a little surprise treat to think of when you are away."

"Away, where?" demanded Jack stubbornly.

"From the stool of repentance you can view afar, as from a pedestal, the ruins of the past," groaned Aunt Mary, bursting into tears.

"Nonsense!" cried Aunt Josephine sharply — "on the memories of a live boy's harmless follies, rather, like — like those mice," and the little lady stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to keep from spoiling the solemnity of the occasion by laughing outright.

"What's the answer to all this, if I may ask?" questioned Jack.

"Well, Jack," said Aunt Angelina, "we have consulted with Judge Bennett to-day."

"I know that. And he has consulted with Mr. Anderson — go on."

"What don't you know!" murmured Aunt Angelina.

"Not much about town that's lively or interesting," responded Jack.

"Our advisers," continued Miss Angelina, "think as we do — that you should occupy your minds, you two boys, with something more sensible than idle frolics. We have reached a decision. If it will not spoil the little spread we really wish you to enjoy, I will tell you now."

"We'll eat, whatever our doom may be," answered Jack sturdily.

"Very well, we have decided to send you away to a boarding school."

Jack sprang two feet from the floor, his eyes sparkled, and he flung his cap up six feet into the air.

"Hurrah!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XII

OFF FOR BOARDING SCHOOL

"GOOD BY, Jack."

"For three days only, Nat. Keep comfortable in the meantime — I'll be greasing the ropes for your reception down at Washington Hall."

"Bet you will," nodded Nat with a grin. "Here's your train coming."

The chums stood on the platform of the little railroad station at Denton. It was early morning. Jack carried a satchel in his hand. Down the platform was his travelling trunk.

He had just gone through the ordeal of parting at home with his three aunts. He had left Aunt Mary in tears, Aunt Josephine laughing at the servant maid, to whom Jack had given a parting gift. It was a box of candy so sticky that a sample had glued the girl's jaws tightly together. She could only wave Jack a mute good-by. Aunt Angelina had followed him clear to the gate with parting advice on flannels, dry feet and good behavior.

Jack was off for boarding school. His trunk

was marked "Lakeside Academy, Rudmore." The local name of the famous old institution of learning was Washington Hall.

The best part of it was that Nat Anderson was to join him there in a few days. Originally it had been arranged that the chums should go together. The death of a relative of the Andersons in an adjoining town had interfered with this arrangement. After the funeral, however, Nat was to come on to Rudmore.

"Good-by, Budge, I didn't expect to see you here," hailed Jack, waving his hand cheerily to that individual. Budge was at the remote end of the platform standing guard over a high circular parcel.

"Zifidforget to see you off! Hope you strike it rich," retorted Budge gaily. "And say, if you can get me a job down there at Rudmore I'll work for nothing."

"Nat," observed Jack, "we have demoralized that fond and ardent youth. By the way, what is that thing he is so suspiciously guarding. Looks like a sewer pipe."

"Hem! why, you see — but here's the train, so long, old man, whoop!"

Nat uttered a piercing yell. Immediately from under the rear end of the platform a dozen boys sprang into view. Each had a bazoo horn. Down the platform they marched like soldiers,

keeping time in a hideous clamor that drowned out even the locomotive whistle.

Jack swung to the coach platform, smiling and waving his hand to the faithful old local academy contingent so unexpectedly appeared. Out of the car windows a dozen passengers stuck their heads in wonder.

"Look out!" yelled Budge Rankin, striking a match and lighting a fuse that hung over the side of the circular object he had been guarding. Its true character was now for the first moment revealed, as its covering fell loose, as an enormous giant firecracker.

"All aboard," ordered the conductor.

Bang! The car windows rattled, the bazoos shrieked out a mad chorus. Jack Ranger entered the rear coach the curious cynosure of startled passengers.

"Parting salute to the local athletic champion, or something of that sort," Jack heard a solemn-visaged old fellow observe to a companion.

Jack appropriated a vacant seat. In about two minutes the train boy entered the car.

"Your name Ranger?" he asked.

"That's me," nodded Jack.

"All right — this is for you, then. Young fellow on the platform threw it to me. Said he was Anderson, and forgot to give it to you. Some of

his mother's home cooking, for your lunch, he said."

Jack glanced into the paper bag extended. It held a dozen cookies. Mrs. Anderson was famous for the same. Jack placed the bag in the rack overhead. In doing so he faced the occupant in the seat behind him. The latter smiled benignly.

He was a lynx-eyed, spare-faced, threadbare-suited individual, squirmy in manner and generally unprepossessing in appearance.

"Ah," he observed, "lots of friends, haven't you? I had once," and the speaker sighed drearily. "Hard fate since then. Lost my all. Gone hungry and cold often. And a missionary, too!"

"That's bad," said Jack. "Are you hungry now, mister?" he asked.

"I am, for a fact."

"When we stop for a meal, join me."

"Thanks — thanks. You are very kind. Meal costs about a quarter, my young friend, does it not?"

"According to what you eat."

"Then — painful to mention, but I could dispense the coin more economically —"

Jack gave the man fifty cents. He did not like him one bit, but Jack was ever generous hearted.

The "missionary" smirked and tried to look tearfully grateful. Jack shut him off by reading a newspaper.

About half-an-hour later Jack looked around with a quick start. A sudden yell had aroused him. Standing in the aisle was "the missionary." He was spluttering and spitting out crumbs like a human Vesuvius. His language was shocking.

"Pretty choice rhetoric for a missionary," observed Jack. "What's hit you, friend?" he asked, as the man glared and shook his fist at him.

"Trick!" choked the man — "low-down, measly sell. Augh! My mouth's burning up. Water — water!"

He made a rush for the water tank at the end of the car. The train boy again came up to Jack.

"Been watching that snoozer," he explained. "Saw him sneak one. Did you plant them a-purpose?"

"Sneaked one?—planted what?" inquired Jack.

"Cookies in that bag. He took one out when you wasn't looking."

"The mischief!" muttered Jack, getting a swift gleam of enlightenment. "I see. Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack inspected the cookies. He found them stuffed with red pepper — one of Nat Anderson's favorite tricks.

"Glad that fellow took a sample first," he chuckled.

The "missionary" resumed his seat, holding his jaws and glaring ferociously at Jack. The latter tried to explain, but the man waved him off with a dignified allusion to "brutal insult to the cloth," and nursed his rage in sullen silence.

There was a five minutes' stop at a little station. New spirit was injected into the journey here by the appearance of a fresh passenger.

A raw-boned farmer with a beard like a muffler came aboard, carrying a carpet sack. Jack happened to be strolling down the aisle. The new passenger appropriated his seat.

He immediately leaned out of the window as a woman's voice spoke:

"See here, Hiram Hedges. Carpet sack safe?"

"Right in my lap."

"Well, you hold on to it tight, now. Remember what I told you about swindlers."

"Yes, marm, I will."

The "missionary" pricked up his ears, and immediately became interested in this confab going on between the new passenger and a tanned, homespun-clad woman, his wife, who stood on the platform outside. Jack, too, was an amused listener.

"Got that two thousand dollars all right?" the woman asked next.

"You bet I have, old woman. Right in the carpet sack here," and the farmer slapped its bulging side with assurance.

"You pay it right over to brother Eph and get that mortgage lifted, the minute you arrive. And you take his advice about that pesky patent of yourn."

"Yes, marm."

"If he says it's eny good, I don't object to spending a few dollars to demmystrate it. If he says it's what I think it is — a foolish, silly 'speriment — you hike home without it."

"I'll just drop it over Niagara Falls, old woman. Good bye, Nancy."

The train started up, and Nancy drifted into the distance. Farmer Hedges proceeded to make himself comfortable. He shifted the carpet sack about in his lap.

"Excuse me," spoke Jack, reaching up to remove his own satchel from the rack overhead.

"Eh? Oh, now, I took your seat," said the farmer.

"That's all right," said Jack. "I can find another."

"No. Sit down here. Plenty of room. You'll just be company. Pretty lonesome, a hundred mile ride."

Jack scented fun, and sat down in the seat as

Hedges made room for him. Within the space of ten minutes the old farmer had recited the details of about half his life.

"Going to visit my brother-in-law for two weeks," he explained. "We owe him a mortgage. Going to lift it with two thousand dollars. Got the money in this bag."

"It appears sort of heavy," remarked Jack — "the way you shift it about."

"That's because I've got my invention in it," replied Hedges.

Jack noted that the "missionary" in the next seat was rustling about a good deal. That individual appeared to listen to and take in all that was being said.

Finally Hedges set the carpet sack on the floor. He placed both of his feet on it. This hunched up his knees uncomfortably. He fidgeted. Jack took a bicycle chain and lock from his pocket.

"Just hitch your bag through the handles to that foot round, Mr. Hedges," he said, "if you feel uneasy about it."

"Now that's neighborly," enthused the farmer as Jack cared for his carpet sack. "I reckon no one will get that bag in a hurry now, eh?"

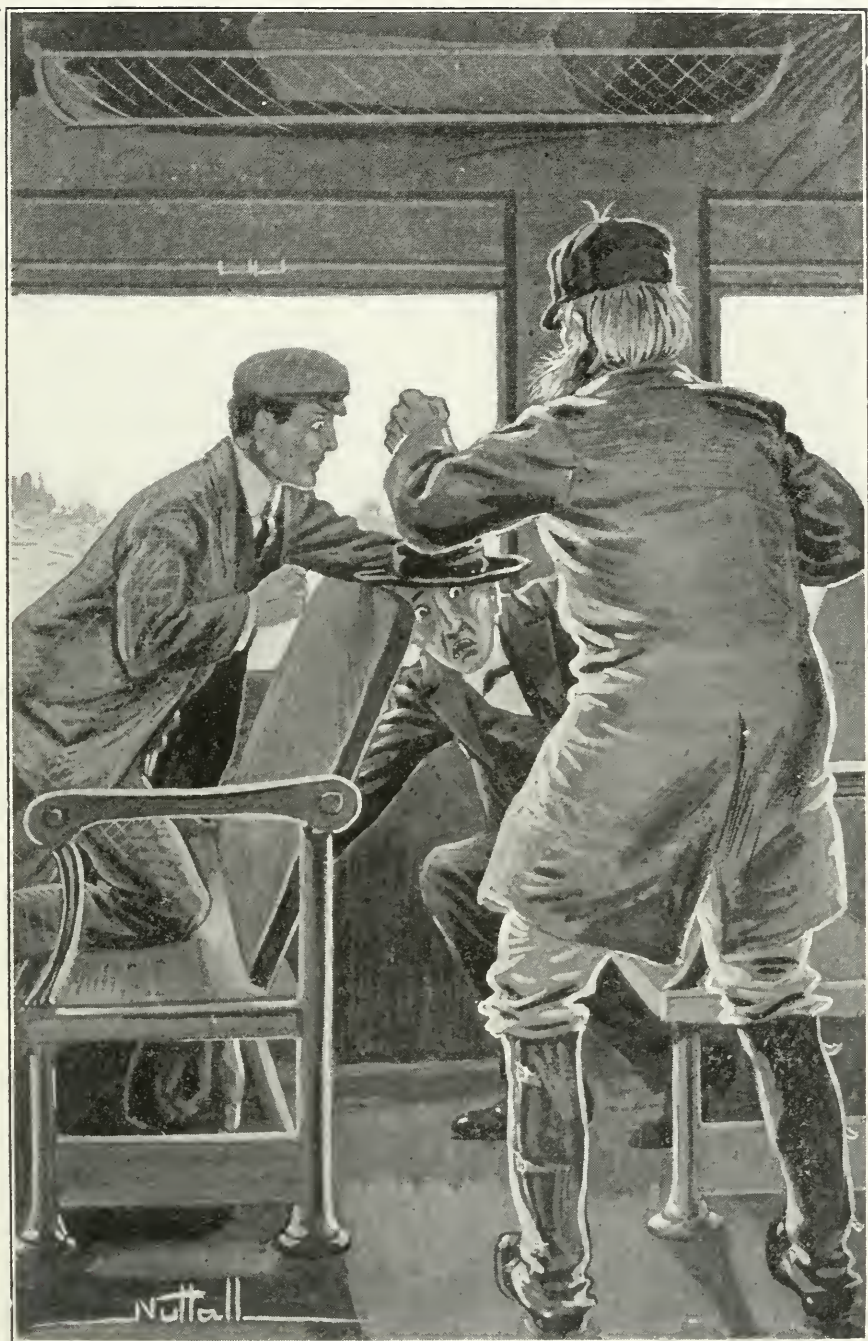
"Not while it's locked there and in full sight," assured Jack.

The farmer offered him a home-made sandwich.

They became quite chummy. Jack learned that the old fellow was bound for his own destination, Rudmore.

"Brother Eph is to meet me at the depot there," explained Hedges. "He'll drive me to the farm. It's only about two and a half miles from town. Drop down and see me some time. Blue brimstone! what's that?"

"Wow! Murder! He-elp! He-elp!" screeched a horrified voice.



"YOU THIEVING RASCAL!" HE ROARED. "LET ME AT HIM!"—
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CHAPTER XIII

A LIVELY CUSTOMER

"HELLO! in trouble again?" hailed Jack Ranger, turning round in astonishment and viewing the occupant of the seat behind him.

The "missionary" was doubled up, gyrating wildly. He was writhing, with one arm caught or fastened under the forward seat. Jack sprang into the aisle, Hedges following him. The farmer peeped and peered. Then he seemed to discover the dilemma of the missionary.

"Why, you ornery, thieving rascal!" he roared. "Let me at him. I'll bat his scurvy head off'n him!"

Hedges gave the "missionary" two or three severe cuffs. There was a look of mortal dread and agony on the face of the latter. Jack managed to get in between them. Then at a glance he discovered the direful fix the "missionary" was in.

He had tried to get at the farmer's boasted two thousand dollars, it seemed. Unable to pull it back under the seat, he had cut a round hole with a sharp knife in one side of the bag.

Into this aperture he had thrust his hand. Grop-

ing for the coveted roll of bank notes, he had slipped his fingers into some metal contrivance with heavy steel jaws. It was the farmer's "patent," Jack judged. As he managed to release the man's wrist, he saw that his fingers were dreadfully lacerated.

The train had stopped for a crossing. It was starting up as the "missionary," dodging a cuff from the irate Hedges, got out into the aisle.

"By heck, I'll give you the hiding of your life!" roared Hedges, tearing off his coat and starting for the craven thief.

The "missionary" made a run for the door. A kick boosted him as he reached the platform. He took a jump, landed flat, face downward, in a muddy ditch, and got up a sorry figure, plastered and dripping, the train leaving him behind.

Hedges came back appeased, and chuckling and radiant.

"Wonder what Nance'll say now!" he cried jubilantly. "Used to sneer at Hi Hedges' patent skunk trap. Why, it's a thief trap, too, hain't it? Saved me two thousand dollars, didn't it? Why, I'll sell one to every banker in the country!"

He proceeded to show his invention to Jack. It was quite a clever device, built on a common rat trap principle, only it had a spring that moved at the least pressure some half-a-dozen sharp-pointed teeth.

"That fellow we just got rid of is an all-round bad man," the conductor said to Jack. "He's a frequent passenger, and something is always missing, or somebody fleeced, whenever he takes a ride."

The journey continued without any further enlivening incidents. However, Jack got a great many rural points from Hedges during a three-hours' conversation. They were points, he decided, that would be useful in future exploration of the pastoral regions located in the neighborhood of Washington Hall.

They arrived at Rudmore at about one o'clock in the afternoon. Hedges left the train with Jack. Both were disappointed in finding no conveyance or person waiting for them.

"Sing'lar," commented the farmer. "Eph knew I was coming."

"Maybe he was delayed — he'll probably be along soon. I expected some one to meet me, too," said Jack. "As I understand it, Washington Hall is a couple of miles from town. There's a sign: Post Office. I'll go over and make some inquiries."

Jack was gone on this mission for over a quarter-of-an-hour. He sought out several men who looked like old residents. One of them finally told of the Academy routine.

"'Bout this time," he explained, "Hexter, the

steward, comes down to meet the trains — usually waits till the two P.M. south train comes in, too. Be along soon to the depot.”

When Jack got back to the depot he found a light automobile standing at the edge of the platform. Hedges had disappeared. The station agent had arrived. He was labelling some freight.

“Have you seen anything of an old farmer — big straw hat, long whiskers?” inquired Jack.

“Oh, that hayseed?” returned the man. “Jesso. Seemed to be waiting for somebody. A fellow who came in on the train just ahead of you, and who has been hanging around here ever since, went off with him.”

“When — where to?” demanded Jack, at once suspicious.

“Down the old turnpike, about ten minutes ago,” explained the station agent, pointing south.

“Who was he?”

“Dunno, stranger here. I wired for him to Goshen just after he arrived. He told somebody at Goshen the tip was all right, and to wait for him.”

“Tip?” murmured Jack — “Goshen? That is the station right beyond the crossing where that missionary got kicked off the train. I’ll bet a hat,” he cried irrepressibly aloud, “that tricky missionary telegraphed ahead to some confederate.

The confederate came on here to wait for Hedges and his two thousand dollars. He found Hedges waiting for his brother-in-law. Pretended he was sent to guide him to the farm. Told some precious yarn, and — they can't have gone far. Say, my man," demanded Jack sharply, "whose automobile is that?"

"Academy."

"Where's the chaffeur?"

"Gone over to chum with some friends till the south train comes in."

"All right. I want to use it for a few minutes."

"Hold on!" yelled the station agent, as Jack sprang into the front seat of the machine and set it spinning.

"It's all right," bawled back Jack, waving his hand reassuringly. "This is part of the Academy? So am I. I'll be back soon."

CHAPTER XIV

ARRIVED!

JACK RANGER was an adept in the use of an automobile. Back at Denton he had acted as chaffeur for Judge Bennett for one whole summer. He sent the present machine whirling down the old country turnpike at a rate that made the landscape fly, and sent the thick, dry dust whirling up into the air in festoons.

Bent to the lever, Jack kept his eyes fixed keenly on the road ahead. There were many turns, and suddenly he set his grasp on the speed regulator and slowed up.

"I was quite right, and I'm just in time, apparently," said Jack.

His eyes were attracted to an interesting picture. By the side of the road two men were scuffling about. One was trying to get at the other. The latter was trying to keep his adversary at bay.

"Hedges for one," muttered Jack. "That precious stranger — and he looks the fake missionary — to a T — for the other. Hi, there!"

The stranger had a revolver in his hand. This he kept pointing at Hedges. The latter, awk-

ward, clumsy, stubborn, fearless and mad as a hornet, swung a long thorn-barbed stick in rapid semi-circles. Meantime, he also clung to his carpet sack like glue.

"Skoot, ye varmint!" roared the sturdy old ruralite. "Who's afraid of your pop gun? Shoo! shoo!"

Around went the stick. It took the stranger on the cheek and ripped a gash there.

"I'll fire," he raved madly. "Give up that satchel, or you'll never see home again."

Neither, absorbed in their quarrel, had seen nor paid the least attention to Jack. He had stopped the automobile, leaped from it, and was approaching them rapidly.

When Jack was less than ten feet away from them, Hedges stumbled backwards on a vine and fell flat. The precious satchel swung several yards beyond his grasp.

Immediately the stranger made a run for it. Jack knew he was no match for the fellow. He braced for a quick dash and made a spring.

Just as the man had bent to secure the satchel, Jack landed squarely on his shoulders. He sprang free to grab up the satchel as he saw the stranger go rolling head over heels across the turf.

"Run for the automobile — get this bag there!" ordered Jack breathlessly, tossing it to the astonished farmer, who had regained his feet.

"Hello — I swan! By hen —"

"Run, I tell you," commanded Jack.

He snatched up a long, heavy tree branch; with this he advanced upon the stranger. The latter, getting to his feet, glared at the sight of him.

"A kid," he snarled. "Why, I'll eat you up!" the fellow continued, as retreating, Jack advanced, switching the branch against his face and confusing and exasperating him.

With an ugly, vicious snort the stranger fumbled in a coat pocket. Jack saw what he produced — some cartridges. His weapon was not loaded, but he was going to load it now, it seemed. There was rough play in his expression of face.

"I'll soon fix you," he shouted.

"Stop. Turn her off!" yelled Jack, at a glance at the automobile.

Hiram Hedges had got aboard. One hand held his satchel. The other was meddling with the lever. The machine had started up. It described a serpentine dash. Then it bucked. It made a half-circle, and then it started on a dive down the road that portended destruction.

"He'll wreck the machine and kill himself," panted Jack. "Shut her off! shut her off!"

"I can't! Jerusha!" shouted Hedges, bobbing up and down in the seat wildly.

Jack gave his protecting tree branch a fling

squarely into the stranger's face. He put after the machine.

He lost hope as it turned a curve and was out of sight like a meteor.

"Whoa! whoa!" he heard Hedges roar. "Gee-haw. Botheration!"

Beyond the curve in the road the farmer's erratic manipulation of the gearing made the automobile turn clear around. This gave Jack his chance. He made a desperate sprint. Just as it shot straight forward again Jack reached the top of the back seat. In thirty seconds he was at the helm once more.

"By hen!" gasped the farmer, as Jack squeezed him close without ceremony in getting control of the machine, "let me out!"

"Crouch back there and keep quiet!" ordered Jack sternly. "That fellow's after us — with a loaded gun, this time."

Hedges tumbled over into the rear seat. Jack thought it best to get out of range of a possible pursuer. At the next turn in the road he slowed down quickly. They had nearly run into a farmer's rig coming from the opposite direction.

"It's Eph!" shouted Hedges, bundling out of the automobile and running up to the driver of the halted vehicle ahead. "Brother-in-law, thar's your two thousand dollars. Kick me all the way

home for being fool enough to try and get it to you by hand. The world's been grabbing for it ever since I left Nance. 'Cept this boy. Hi, you, young Ranger, help yourself!"

The speaker pulled his own private pigskin wallet from his pocket and extended it generously to his rescuer.

"Put it up, Mr. Hedges," said Jack with a smile. "You've pretty near tired out this machine with the course of sprouts you've put her through," he continued, turning on the sparker and cranking the machine afresh.

Jack was getting ready for a return to Rudmore depot and Hedges was relating his sensational adventures to his gaping brother-in-law, when a perspiring horseman dashed up.

He had on a uniform cap of some kind, and looked quite consequential as he shouted out:

"Halt, in the name of the law!"

"We're halted, hain't we?" demanded Hedges.

"I arrest the whole party. Ha! you fit the description," added the newcomer with a quick glance at Jack. "Did you steal this automobile from the depot at Rudmore?"

Jack soon enlightened the newcomer, who proved to be a Rudmore policeman. The latter put back over the road, inspired by Hedges' offer of ten dollars' reward if he captured his would-be despoiler. Jack promised to at once return with the automobile to the depot.

"That stranger was smooth as honey," narrated Hedges. "He made me believe that Eph here was laid up with a sprain, farm burned down, hosses loose, and he sent to pilot me, drat him!"

"Clock must have been slow," drawled Eph. "Well, be thankful to this young man, and climb aboard."

"Ranger, if you ever get into trouble, send for Hi Hedges," sang out the old farmer.

"Well, if they chase me from Washington Hall, I'll give you a call, Mr. Hedges."

Jack rode back to Rudmore. He met the village officer, all covered with brambles and tired out after a fruitless scurry of the woods in search of the thieving stranger.

As Jack circled up to the depot platform a little group approached, led by an angry-faced man about thirty years of age.

"See here," spoke the latter severely, "I'm Hexter, steward at the Academy."

"That so?" nodded Jack coolly — "I'm Ranger, student at the Hall."

"Ah, that explains it," observed the steward, with a sudden grin.

"Explains what?" inquired Jack.

"Stunts — Heard of you. Knew you was coming."

Just here the town policeman appeared on the scene. The whole party retired in the direction of the post-office, the official evidently narrating

the cause and result of Jack's audacious appropriation of the automobile.

Jack sat down on a bench on the depot platform to rest. He was fanning himself leisurely when a lad of about his own age crossed over from the direction of the post-office.

He was dressed in outing garb and carried a golf stick, shying at pebbles as he approached the depot. Jack liked his looks, and wondered if he was a student at the Academy.

The newcomer had a settled poise of manner that showed him to have both gumption and experience. He halted squarely in front of Jack and looked him over audaciously. Then his hand shot out.

"Ranger," he said encouragingly, "you look good to me — and how are you?"

"You have the advantage of me," said Jack, standing up and smiling, "but you shake hands as if you knew something, and you've got my name right. At the local Academy where I lived they got it Danger."

The stranger enjoyed a deep chuckle. His eyes snapped.

"You'll do," he said with a sharp nod.

"Do what?" inquired Jack with an innocent look that made the other guffaw.

"Do most anything, I fancy, when fun's in the wind. You're coming in with a blaze, it looks."

“How is that?”

“Reporter over at the post-office is getting a two-column interview from Massey, the policeman. ‘Bullet-defying Ajax of Washington Hall nobly rescues a poor farmer and his lifetime savings from the hands of a desperado horde of outlaws!’ Come over and get dusted off — you need it. Also some soda. Does it strike you?”

“Always,” answered Jack promptly — “especially in such delightful company. Let’s see? you’re Sam Chalmers.”

“Eh! How did you guess that?” demanded his companion in surprise.

“Saw the name in the Academy prospectus they sent my folks, and those initials on your golf stick suggested a guess.”

“Well, you’ve got eyes all right,” applauded Chalmers admiringly. “Brains, too, I’ll venture. You never heard of me probably —”

“I can see what I’ve missed,” declared Jack.

“But we have of you. One of our fellows went through Denton last summer. It appears you had gone through the town yourself the night before with a choice coterie of your friends. Remember the occasion?”

“Really — so many incidents in my young career, you know” — Jack stammered purposely.

“Reception of the mayor for state governor. Waiting at depot. Your crowd managed to get

word to the waiting committee that governor was only to pass through Denton in a carriage. They scurried back to flower-trimmed grand stand on the village common. Carriage drove up. Open brouche. Kept in shade, dignified figure in seat. Colored driver — Jack Ranger in lamp black. Mayor directs his oration at distinguished visitor. No response. Driver disappears. Crowd finally ventures nearer to the august governor. Ha, a dummy! ”

“ Who’s the fellow who told you all this? ” asked Jack admiringly.

“ He’s reporting on a daily newspaper, now. ”

“ He’s struck his gait, let me tell you, ” declared Jack.

“ Correct, was he? ” insinuated Chalmers.

“ Except that all the fireworks had been let off, train came in, nobody at depot to welcome the governor. Next day Nat Anderson and I started on a two weeks’ walking tour. ”

“ Who’s Nat Anderson,— a crony? ”

“ Ye-es, sort of familiar spirit. He’ll be on here in a few days. ”

Sam Chalmers groaned. He shook his head solemnly.

“ It’s sad, brother, it’s sad! ” he said dismally.

“ Come on and get some of the dust off you, and out of you. ”

Jack discovered that he had struck a capital

fellow. Sam poured two excellent sodas down him, brushed up his clothes, and pointed out the main local points in the landscape.

Another boy came, twanging a jolly tune on a jewsharp.

"That's Fred Kaler, musical chap," explained Sam. "Always at it. Genius in that line, from cow bells up to base drum."

"Hi, there, Chalmers — new victim? Teaching him the way he should go?" challenged Kaler.

"Mistake," objected Sam tersely — "past grand master of the art himself. Come down to give us some new wrinkles."

They returned to the depot. The south train had arrived and was just pulling out. Jack observed two boys with fancy satchels strapped across their shoulders.

They were dressed precisely alike and dressed most excellently, except that they were over-foppish as to outing shirts and neckties.

Both carried slim canes and wore gold rimmed eyeglasses, and acted the languid sports to perfection. They got into the automobile as if it had been sent especially for them.

"Well, if it isn't the Echoes!" exclaimed Sam Chalmers with a grin.

"Queer name — why Echoes?" propounded Jack.

"You'll find out soon for yourself. Tall fel-

low is rich and thinks he is aristocratic, although his father made his pile on salary loans. Name: Percy Lorimer. His second is a cousin, poor, and a toady. Name, Buck Scroggs. Why, hello!" hailed Sam, approaching the auto, "thought you was going to some other school this term?"

"Yaas," drawled Lorimer wearily, "Yale —"

"And Harvard," echoed Scroggs.

"Both at the same time?" demanded Sam.

"Investigated both, and found them hardly congenial —" began Percy.

"Absolutely unspeakable," nodded Buck.

Hexter, Academy steward and chauffeur, put in his appearance, nodded all around in a familiar manner and started up the machine.

"I say," observed Jack in a confidential whisper to his companion, "what that fellow doesn't know about an auto would fill a book."

"He's a scrub generally," said Sam — "except cheese-paring on table supplies."

Jack was quite interested in studying the original way in which Hexter ran the machine. He was only a shade less dangerous than Farmer Hiram Hedges.

Twice he struck a tree at the side of the road, and in going over a culvert tore one protecting side rail into kindling wood. Clear of the town he set the speed gear to the limit. Jack was prepared to jump when the crash came. They flew past a mag-

nificent lake, flowered meadows and basky dells. Then at a turn in the road grand old Washington Hall loomed up in the distance, an admirable and inviting spectacle.

They circled the campus, sending the gravel flying, then dove straight up a broad reach of road. Here Jack felt compelled to shout out.

"Throw off the speed gear, man — you'll smash us!"

Jack foresaw danger. He started to lean over into the propelling machinery. Sam Chalmers jerked him back without ceremony.

"He'll land us hard," explained Jack.

"Shut up. Let him. Make the entree royally, Ranger."

Hexter fumbled at the propelling gear. He uttered a sharp yell of dismay.

Sho-ooop! rattlety-bang! Crash! Whirr-ree-re! groaned the machine as it lifted and ran straight up the broad front steps of the entrance to the Academy. It dashed open the two great doors, shaking, quaking, whirring, bucking into the big stone fountain in the center of the vestibule.

"Arrived!" announced Sam Chalmers in a delirious tone, jumping free of the gyrating car. A characteristic arrival, indeed!

CHAPTER XV

A CRACK QUARTETTE

JACK RANGER dove over into the front seat of the automobile. He brushed the fumbling Hexter aside and brought things to a dead stop.

Percy Lorimer jumped from the car with a petty scream. Scoggs imitated him to the echo, only more girlishly.

"Horrible!" declared Percy, straightening his disordered cap.

"Outrageous!" said Scoggs. "Might treat us like gentlemen, at least."

"Here, Hexter, get these two over to the young ladies' seminary," suggested Sam Chalmers.

The exquisites retired, looking their disgust at their tormentor. A crowd began to fill the hall. Fellows came sliding down banisters and gliding magically into view from a dozen radiating corridors.

Hexter, perturbed and serious, set at work backing down to *terra firma*. Jack helped him get the car where it belonged just as a lank, profound-looking individual parted the throng of chaffing youths and confronted Sam and Jack.

"What's all this?" he demanded, bending his brows in a dreadful scowl.

"Self — Jack Ranger, new student, Professor Grimm," reported Chalmers crisply. "Your chauffeur fired us in hard. No hand in the fun, Professor, I assure you — nobody but Hexter could do this act of genius."

"Ha, hum. You are dismissed, gentlemen," spoke the professor to the throng. "Glad to see you back, Chalmers. This is Ranger, is it?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jack.

"Follow me, if you will, young man, and we will get you started on the right road."

Sam gave Jack a hunch, chuckling. Jack wondered if the professor intended to insinuate that he was on the wrong one.

"I don't fancy Professor Grimm," said Jack with conviction half-an-hour later, as he left that individual's private office.

Professor Grimm had acted as if he was admitting him to the Hall under protest. He referred to his friend at Denton, Judge Bennett — "trusty old watch dog of his clients' interests," he described him. He gave Jack a set of printed rules, marking only those referring to good behavior.

"You seem to have become acquainted with Chalmers," the professor had said. "He will post you on our dormitory routine and the like."

Chalmers did some fine service for Jack during the next half-hour. He assisted Jack in selecting a room, and getting settled.

"Dick, otherwise known as 'Bony' Balmore," introduced Sam, indicating a tall, lank boy stretched out on the bed with both pillows under his feet. "Uncoil, Bony, and show Jack Ranger our anatomical department."

Balmore got up with a grin. He shook himself, meantime cleverly imitating rattling bones with his lips, amusing Jack immensely.

"Bob Movel," continued Sam, with a tap of his foot, sending a book in that individual's hand kiting over into a corner. "This celebrated specimen sleeps only at night and eats only when awake. Walking compendium of blood and thunder literature, and believes it all. Kaler, you know," added Sam, as the musical chap who had hailed him in town entered, banging away at a set of clappers, and singing melodiously of a select soiree in Sunflower Row, where "not a coon came out the way that he went in."

"Pzznt!" spoke a happy-faced young fellow who had been leaning out of the window firing peanuts at the gardener clipping the hedges.

"Oh, yes," said Sam, "Ranger, this is Will Slade. Never tells too much at a time. Show him, Sladesy."

"Pzznt. D-d-de-de —"

"-lighted, yes, go on," encouraged Chalmers, consulting his watch.

"Pzznt. T-t-to-s-s-se-see you," stuttered Slade.

"We-we-we-welc-welc-"

"Time!" shouted Sam — "welcome to Washington Hall. Say Washington Hall, Will. Speak right out."

"Pzznt! C-c-can-cant-t-t-too-l-l-long."

"Cut it short, then. We four compose the Academy social outcasts," went on Sam in a chipper way. "As to the beacon lights, there are Dr. Henry Mead, owner of the place, a good old soul, Professor Grimm, whom you have met, sours the milk in the cocoanut of learning every time. Paul Gales and Sydney Hall are educational assistants. Subordinate geniuses are Martin, the monitor, and Socker, the janitor. Both are trying to save enough money to get away from us. Ah, one more necessary introduction. Mr. Jerry Chowden. Like his looks?"

Sam took Jack by the arm and led him straight up to a framed photograph about two feet square. Jack looked puzzled. He had never seen such a portrait before. It represented a chub-faced fellow of about eighteen. One eye was blackened and half-closed. His nose was covered with sticking plaster. His cheeks were crossed with scratches. In fact, he resembled some ardent pugilist after a scrimmage.

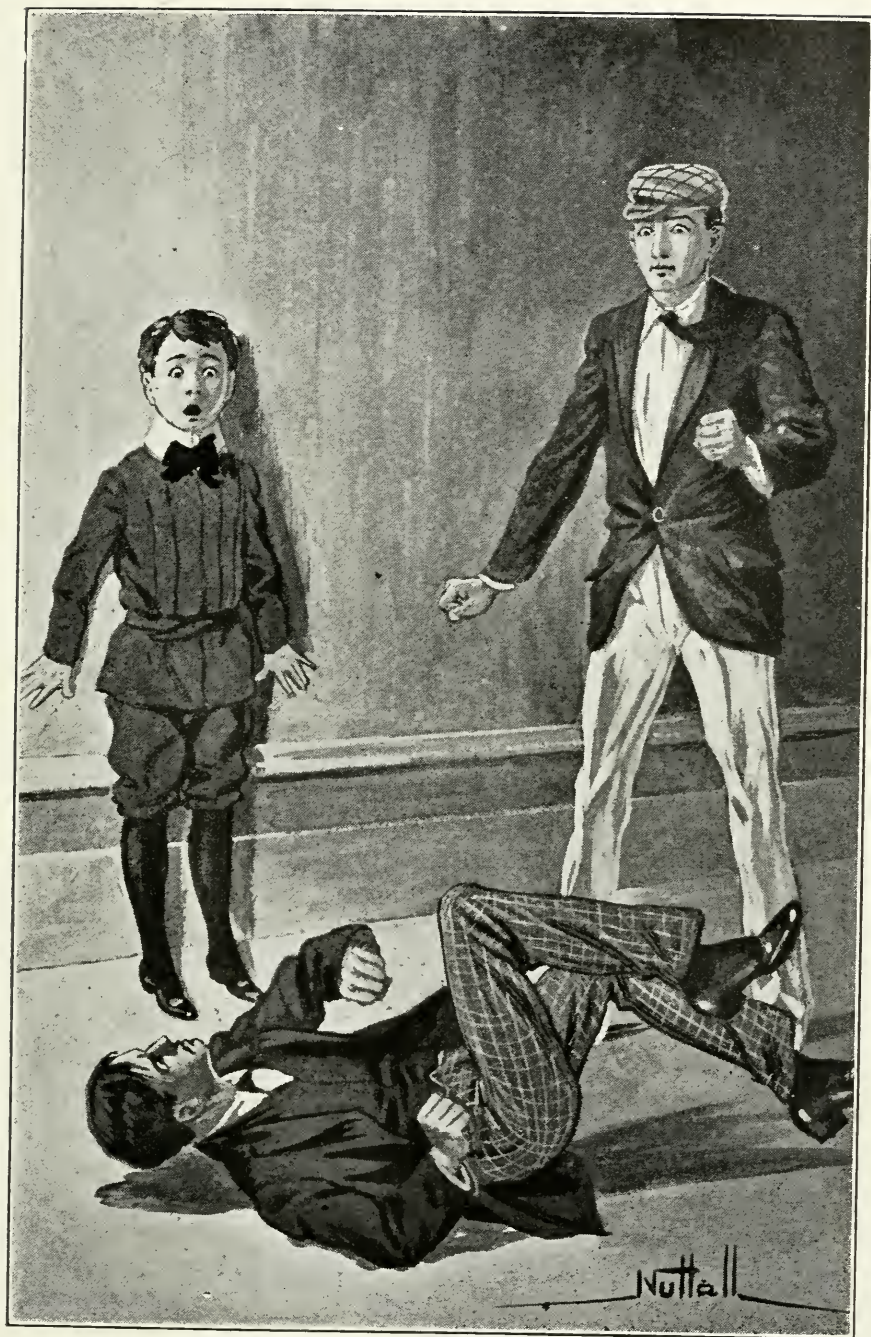
"That is certainly the limit in the portrait line," said Jack.

"Think so?" smiled Sam. "Mr. Jerry Chowden, would-be bully of Lakeside Academy, as Washington Hall is sometimes called. No mistake as to muscle, but we steered him up against a lank, guileless-looking rustic we paid to do some training. After Jerry was laid out, four of us held him till the picture was taken. Had it enlarged. He anticipated vacation a week, and left vowing he'd spend his leisure blocking out what he'd do to us when he came back this term. Chowden in his stall yet, Bony?"

"Here to-morrow, I understand," responded Balmore. "Think so, for some pet toads Movel has been keeping have been missing. I think they're waiting for Chowden under his pillow now."

It was two days before the new term would actually commence. The boys took a stroll. Sam introduced Jack to a good many others. It appeared, however, that his special friends and special set comprised mainly these whom Jack already knew.

Jack was busy for an hour a little later unpacking his trunk, which had arrived. He set things in comfortable order in his room and started to rejoin Sam, going down the corridors whistling contentedly.



LANDING HIS FISTS ON THE BULLY'S FACE, HE SENT HIM SPRAWLING.—Page 121.

A shrill wail caused Jack to halt promptly. It was an utterance of pain and distress. Jack noticed two forms scuffling at the end of a long hall. He started down it to find out what was going on.

A big shock-headed fellow held a tiny little chap by the ear, while he whirled and banged him about.

"Quit your snivelling, you little beggar," ordered the burly fellow. "Will you go and get me those tarts?"

"I can't — I dassent," whimpered his victim. "It's stealing."

"I'll tear your ear clean off, if you don't."

"Ow — help!" screamed the little fellow, as his cruel captor swung him out by the tender bruised ear and jerked him back again.

Jack's blood boiled. He made a dash for the spot.

"You great brute!" he cried with flashing eyes, and landing his fist on the bully's face he sent him sprawling.

The little fellow with a cluck of rare relief and delight darted instantly from the scene.

"Why — whoof! Oh — whoof! Say, you struck me!" bellowed the big fellow, getting up slowly and working his half-cracked jaw.

"Do you want another?" demanded Jack sternly, walking straight up to him and looking him squarely in the eye.

"I — you — say, you'll pay for this, oh, but I'll fix you! Do you know who I am?"

"A mean-spirited coward, for one thing."

"I'm Lem Grimm. My uncle is the professor. Show you. Ouch — whoof! I'll have you fired, I will."

"And I'm Jack Ranger," said Jack simply, with fire still in his eye. "Go and tell your uncle, the professor, and tell him, too, I am sorry to know that he has to claim such a sneak as you for a relative."

CHAPTER XVI

" IN RETIREMENT "

" THAT's pretty quick work. Fair play, Grimm! "

" Oh, he won't fight," said Jack.

He turned to observe a bright-faced young fellow, who appeared suddenly on the scene from a side corridor.

Lem Grimm was sneaking away. He took his hand from his jaw long enough to show a most beautifully disfigured upper lip, and muttering savagely:

" You're Ranger, are you? Well, you'll range out of here before you're twenty-four hours older. I fancy my uncle will curb some of your high temper."

" That's as may be," retorted Jack. " Temper? It's principle, you sneak. I wouldn't be a man to stand by and see you hammer that poor little fellow."

The newcomer looked after the retreating bully, shaking his head dubiously.

" There goes a bad egg, if there ever was one," he said. " So you're Ranger? New student.

Chalmers told me about you. I am Dolph Marvin. I'd like to be witness against that cad, Grimm. Unfortunately, I saw nothing but the blow. What was he up to, this time?"

Jack briefly related the details of the incident.

"That was poor little Meridith," said Marvin. "This big lump flogs him every time he comes here, because he's little."

"Is Grimm a student here?" asked Jack.

"Thank goodness — no!" replied Marvin with fervor. "He's a nephew of the professor. They're two birds of a kind, too, I can tell you. That Lem is in a city dental school. They say the professor is his guardian, has borrowed some money from him, and has to toady to him."

"Of course he will complain?" suggested Jack.

"Of course he will, and of course you will go."

"That's pretty comforting," thought Jack. "I'd like to be fired back home this quick! Besides — there's Nat."

Jack was a trifle uneasy. He went to his room and sat there for ten minutes thinking he might be sent for. No one appearing, he strolled down to Sam Chalmers' room.

Sam was not there, but his faithful cohorts were, making free with his belongings. Jack sat down. Suddenly his companions started up from their lazy attitudes of rest and looked towards the corridors. They winked and grinned.

"What may that be?" asked Jack, as he caught the echo of heavy footsteps. These were accompanied by loud guttural hemming and hawing. It seemed as if the approaching party was making all the bustle he could to announce his coming.

"That is a warning — to us," explained Bony Balmore. "It's also a precaution — on the part of the comer."

"It's Socker, the janitor," said Fred Kaler. "He's got seasoned to our crowd. Used to sneak in on us. We forced him to carry an umbrella and a club till we cured him of his sneaking habit. Now he's wise enough to warn us of his visits."

A grizzled, shrew-looking old fellow poked his face in at the open doorway a minute later.

"Looking for a new student," he explained — and then paused to go over and inspect a sword hanging on the wall along with some other of Chalmers' curios: "Say, boys, this reminds me of the time I was at the battle of Pittsburg Landing. The enemy —"

Balmore got up, and with prodigious bustle walked to the window. Fred Kaler rattled his bones deafeningly. Poor Socker looked aggrieved at being shut off in his martial recital.

"Let's see, what did I come here for?" he resumed. "Oh, yes — new student. You look strange," he added, discovering Jack. "I am sent — why, say, that's a neat cap of yours," he

interrupted himself, flying off again on a reminiscence tangent. "The sutler of the fifth army corps brought down a lot of just such caps in '63. It was just before the battle of Island Ten, where I —"

Here Bob Movel, stretched out on three chairs, made a turn-over with a hideous clatter, sending the end chair against the narrator's shins, nearly tripping him up and effectually squelching the unfortunate Socker.

With ruffled dignity of manner the janitor was about to recur to his real mission when Sam Chalmers burst excitedly into the room.

"Hi, there, Jack Ranger!" he hailed, "in the name of double-action impetuosity, what in thunder have you been up to now?"

"Why?" questioned Jack, trying to smile.

"Go down and take a look at the bulletin board and find out. Why, you're the champion, for sure. Beats the record all hollow. Four hours on the list, and scheduled 'In Retirement.'"

"Is that true Chalmers?" asked Jack, looking pretty serious.

"It is. What are you after, anyway?" demanded Sam with some desperation, as Socker edged him aside to face Jack more closely.

"Him. He's Ranger, I heard you call him, Mr. Ranger, just been to your room. Was di-

rected here. I bear a message from Professor Grimm. Message? My! the word reminds me of a secret despatch I once took for General Grant at Chattanooga —"

An unearthly howl chorused by four unanimous voices drowned out the sequence.

"I understand," nodded Jack, hastening action by moving towards the door. "Be back soon, fellows."

Sam and his chums stared lugubriously after Jack. The latter made his way alone to the office. He tapped smartly on the door.

"Come in," ordered a deep voice that was full of malice and menace.

Jack entered and stood still, a little fazed, before three persons — Grimm and two of the under teachers. Professor Grimm greeted him with an awful look.

"Have you your rules with you?" he demanded, cutting out the words like chunks of ice.

"I have, sir," bowed Jack.

"Rule 4. I remind you —"

"No need, Professor Grimm," interrupted Jack coolly. "It covers fighting inside the Hall and I suppose that is what I am summoned here for."

"You are. We have heard the evidence. Are you guilty?"

"I wish to explain —" began Jack.

"Did you hear me, sir!" demanded Professor Grimm in an actual roar. "Are you, or are you not guilty?"

"If you mean that I knocked down a ruffianly brute for torturing a poor little lad — yes," answered Jack.

"Silence, sir. You disobeyed one of the most stringent rules of this institution," said Professor Grimm. "That is all we wish to know. It is the sense of this faculty," and he nodded to the assistant professors, who looked meek and bored, "that you be placed in retirement. Go to your room, sir. To-morrow you will apologize publicly to the person you assaulted. Otherwise, I shall not await Dr. Mead's return, but will officially suspend you from Lakeside Academy."

Jack swallowed a lump in his throat, but he lifted his head higher yet.

"Professor Grimm," he said firmly, "you need not wait until to-morrow. I will make no apology, public or otherwise, to the coward and sneak who has got me into this trouble. I knocked him down for a low, mean act, and I'd do it again for the same cause."

"In Retirement!" roared Professor Grimm in a terrible tone, pointing a finger to the door.

Jack went up to his room, a little gloomy, but fully resolute. He knew that "retirement" would be changed to "in custody," if he mingled at

large with any of the students. Further, if any of them spoke to him till the ban was removed, they were liable to punishment themselves.

Jack sat down by the open window in quite a serious mood. Several times he noticed a man walk slowly by the open door of his room. This person he took to be Martin, the monitor.

A little later a waiter from the dining room brought him up his supper. Jack did not let worry interfere with his appetite. Just before dusk he began a letter to his aunts. It announced his regret at expulsion, but explained its cause. Jack was not in a mood to finish the letter, however.

He lit the gas and tried to read a book. While thus engaged, his attention was attracted to the window. Something flapped there. It was a letter tied to a weight, both dangling from a cord dropped from an upper window.

There were a few consoling lines from Sam Chalmers. They wound up by advising Jack to stand by his guns, and intimated that old Grimm might suspend him, but could not officially expel him without the sanction of Dr. Mead.

By nine o'clock most of the lights in the various rooms were out. The big building was quiet now. Jack pulled off coat and shoes and flung himself on the bed. He was not sleepy, however. Then he sat down again at the window, glancing out at the pretty moonlit scene,—the college grounds

melting into the rare, silvered beauty of Rudmore Lake.

"It's a pity, if I have to go," he reflected. "It's just famous here — boys and all. H'm. That's suspicious," and he gave a sniff.

Jack peered about to ascertain the source of a distinct wave of tobacco smoke. No one was in view in the grounds below. Every few minutes a regular stream of tobacco scent would pass his nostrils. He set himself to investigate.

"I declare," muttered Jack at length. "Well, that's ingenious, if it is fatally reprehensible, as Rule 7 says. I wonder who the culprit may be? Whoever he is, he is blowing the smoke into that drain pipe. As smoke goes up and not down, the source must be somewhere on the next, or the ground floor."

Jack had unmistakably discovered that the smoke struck his face just opposite to a little rust-worn nail hole in the big zinc pipe that drained the roof eaves. This pipe lined one side of the window frame of his room. He traced its lower course. It ran diagonally twenty feet across the brick wall of the building, dipped close to a window on the second floor, and then cut down a dead wall to the ground.

Jack leaned far out of the window. He could observe that the room was lighted, the window of which the descending drain pipe neared. He

began to calculate. Sam Chalmers had pointed out localities in general to him during a brief stroll that afternoon.

"Why," suddenly exclaimed Jack, a lot of strange imaginings running riot through his mind, "it's queer, but that's Professor Grimm's room!"

CHAPTER XVIII

PROFESSOR GRIMM'S SECRET

TIME had hung heavy on Jack Ranger's hands for some hours. He was glad to welcome a variation to the monotony. Besides that, he indulged in some flighty but stimulating guesses as he located Professor Grimm's room.

Jack made sure that the Academy grounds were deserted. He was lightly clad and in his stocking feet. He decided what he would do, and forthwith he did it.

"Yes," declared Jack a minute later, "that is Professor Grimm's room, and some one — oh, shocking! oh horrors — is smoking in there. Pshaw, though! come to think of it, if that fellow Lem is the culprit, the game isn't worth the candle."

Jack had easily let himself down a convenient trellis and gained the ground; now standing under the shadow of the great larch tree, he looked up at the window where the light showed. This had a shade that pulled up from the bottom. There was about a foot of space at the top unprotected.

"I'll go a trifle further, anyway," decided Jack, and was up the tree like a squirrel. "Oh, bees-wax! Rule 7! Why, the old hypocrite! Well! well! well!"

Jack Ranger snuggled back in a network of branches, and simply stared across a ten foot space and down into the lighted room.

A remarkable picture presented. The transom above its doorway was covered with a doubled bed spread. Over the keyhole of the door was a sheet of paper. Seated in an easy chair, sprawled out comfortably, was the august Professor Grimm.

The stem of a big-bowled meerscham pipe, tightly tipped with a metal cover, was between his lips. He would take a long, enjoyable draught. Then he would turn to what resembled a phonograph horn at his side, and eject the smoke into it. The smoke would immediately disappear, as if drawn off by some forceful natural suction.

"The inventive old skeesicks!" said Jack. "Hiram Hedges' patent trap is nowhere beside this work of art. Ah, Professor, fie, fie, for shame!"

Jack readily made out the situation. The professor had constructed a most ingenious device to assist his surreptitious enjoyment of the weed. Apparently he had made a hole through the inside and outer wall, and into the drain pipe. He had inserted a piece of gas pipe in this orifice. Into

the round end of this fitted the flaring horn, the device carrying off the tobacco smoke readily. When not in use evidently he hid the horn and covered the hole in the wall with a picture.

Jack descended the tree with a grin, and got back to his room chuckling. He could sleep now. Jack was not worrying any longer. A benign expression on his face, he crept into bed, laughed cheerily half-a-dozen times, and slept like a log.

At seven o'clock the next morning a waiter brought up Jack's breakfast. At eight the under teacher, Hill, entered the room.

"You are to see Professor Grimm," he announced in a tone intended to be severe.

"What for! It will be of no use," responded Jack decisively.

Professor Grimm was not in the office. Jack went up to his room, tapped on the door, and was told to enter. He found the astute old educator posed at the mantel, with his bushy brows drawn in their usual scowl.

"Transgressors' ways are thorny paths," Professor Grimm delivered in effectual oratorical style. "Young man, you have had a night for reflection"—plunk, plunk—"for remorse"—plunk, plunk—"for contrition"—plunk, plunk.

"Pzznt!" Jack felt like yelling outright—Will Slade's one introductory word to his stuttering vocabulary. The professor's plunk, plunk, was

a sort of lip-smacking guttural of self-approbation he always employed when he fancied he was saying something smart.

Jack said nothing. He located the spot where the horn had protruded the night before.

"Oh, yes," continued Professor Grimm, "the way of the wayward is — is"

"Ker-chew!" sniffed Jack abruptly. "Excuse me, Professor," he added with naive simplicity. "I caught cold, I fear, while sitting at the open window last night — reflecting," sniff, sniff, "remorsing," sniff, sniff, "contriting."

All this Jack delivered so innocently and naturally, that after one sharp glance of suspicion the professor apparently traced only the incoherent statement of a broken-spirited culprit.

"Then you are ready to make what amends you can?" he demanded loudly.

"Maybe it wasn't a draught," went on Jack vacantly, still regarding the wall with a fixed glance. "Maybe it was a nightmare, all of it."

"What are you ranting about, Ranger?" inquired Professor Grimm testily.

"Ker-chew! Same scent here. No, I never smoke, professor.— I suppose that is why the taint of tobacco effects me so."

"What's that?" cried Grimm in a startled way. And then, rather feebly: "Tobacco!"

"Yes, sir. I seem to smell it here."

"Here? Ridiculous," asserted Grimm, but wriggling somewhat uneasily.

"Anyhow," continued Jack, "I got it sitting at my window last night, good and strong, yes sir, good and strong."

"Some one in the grounds," spoke Grimm hurriedly. "So, return to the point at issue, young man."

"No, sir. It came from a hole in the drain pipe."

Professor Grimm's eyes bulged. He stared at Jack.

He tried to read the enigma in that face, made purposely blank and puzzling.

"I knew it was against the rules," proceeded Jack. "And, you see, it was sort of mystifying, too. I got outside into the grounds and climbed a tree. No, it wasn't a nightmare. There's the hole the horn fitted into right in your wall here. I didn't dream it. That hole runs into the drain pipe, doesn't it, Professor Grimm?"

Jack had stepped to the wall. He suddenly pulled aside the picture covering the professor's smoke conduit. Then he sat down in a chair twirling his thumbs and saying solemnly.

"Wasn't it queer, now — right in this room. I didn't dream it, after all."

Jack had played all his cards now. He sat apparently studying out figures in the carpet on

the floor. All the time, however, he kept a side view of the professor's face.

It had turned red as a beet. Its owner's eyes stuck out and he rustled about nonplussed. There was as much as two minutes dead silence in the apartment.

Jack never moved from his mild, negative pose. He was master of the situation, and he knew it.

"Ranger," finally spoke the professor in a rather faint voice.

"Yes, sir," said Jack meekly.

"I — hem, ha — find there may be — mitigating circumstances — trifle too severe — question of expediency — in this matter."

"I'm willing to let it work out that way, if you say so," said Jack.

"Forgive — hum, ha, and — forget. Ah, yes," said Professor Grimm, expanding. "Let us be charitable in all things. Sinful mortals. We all have our failings."

"Not a word," said Jack Ranger.

"Shall we say — ha, hum — waters of oblivion? Let the incident pass — wholly, Ranger — wholly?"

The professor actually employed a pleading tone.

"It's enough said for me," answered Jack submissively. "I won't refer to any branch of the matter, pro nor con, if you say so."

"I do say so, Ranger," said Grimm fervently. "By the way, as you pass out of the building with your companions, you may remove that notice from the bulletin board."

"Thanks," said Jack arising promptly. "Good day, Professor Grimm."

"It's — it's understood," pressed the professor, his big brow in a profuse perspiration, his tones husky and strained in their expression of anxiety.

"I won't chase down any more drain pipes, if that's what you mean," said Jack. "It's none of my business, you see."

"I have your promise — your solemn promise, Ranger? It means a great deal to me."

"You have my word, Professor Grimm," said Jack. "I never broke it yet."

Jack heard the professor flop into a chair with a deep groan as he left the room. Jack went straight down stairs. The hall was filled with students bustling busily about. He started to locate Sam Chalmers.

A familiar figure sauntered past him. It was Lem Grimm. He had a piece of sticking plaster on his lip, and appeared in no wise abashed at thus publicly parading himself.

Twice he put himself in Jack's way. One or two inferior looking chaps, evidently cronies, kept

with him. They viewed Jack with a sort of expectant air.

Just as Jack discovered Sam and Fred Kaler, and was making for them, Lem Grimm placed himself straight in his course. Jack looked him squarely in the eye.

"Are you trying to run up against me — again?" he demanded sternly.

"H'm — giving you an opportunity, that's all," said Lem, with a wink at his companions."

"For what?"

"I reckon you know. Saw my uncle? Yes? Then he told you of course. Public apology," spoke Lem in so loud a tone that every eye in the hall was attracted to the scene.

"There is my answer," said Jack, promptly, stepping up to the Academy bulletin board and tearing to strips the announcement of his retirement.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAKING FRIENDS

"HOLD on!" gasped Lem Grimm in an appalled way. "Oh, when my uncle knows this —"

He jumped for the stairs and was up them in a jiffy, followed by cat calls from some of the little fellows, bestowing their real opinions when his back was turned.

Sam and others surrounded Jack, asking for an explanation. Jack declined to give any details, however, saying simply that he had been requested by Professor Grimm to remove the notice from the bulletin board.

The incident passed with that, for great preparations for the day were on. Those who had arrived before term date were bent, it seemed, on a trip to Sunset Island, in the center of Rudmore Lake.

All were busy with preparations for the day's outing. Fishing tackle and lunch were being packed up.

"Get what togs you want, and come down to the lake wharf in half-an-hour," Sam directed Jack. "You'll go with us in the *Sprite*, Ranger."

"Thanks," said Jack. "You have a fine lake here. Many boats?"

"All sorts. Lorimer has a superb little steam launch, and lots of the fellows have rowing skiffs. Be on time. It's a sort of a race, this first start of the season."

Jack went to his room and dressed for the outing. He needed some lead for sinkers, and as he came into the grounds again he noticed old Socker, the janitor, pottering away at a big lawn mower outside of what looked like a tool house.

"I can probably get what I want from him," thought Jack.

As he made his way in the direction of his quest, passing some grape trellises, Jack slowed up at the echo of prodigious rustling and a chorus of subdued, though excited juvenile voices.

He distinguished that of the little Meredith fellow he had rescued from the big bully, Lem Grimm, the afternoon previous.

"Don't I tell you so?" the lad was saying earnestly to a group about him. "Has everybody got one?"

"Yes, yes." "Mine's ready." "Particularly old one, mine—" mingled voices fluttered out these responses.

"Don't miss him, that's all," warned the first speaker. "Jolly, he's fired! I heard his uncle, gruff and solemn as an owl, tell him to pack up

quick and get out the back way, and take the train — said he had got him into all kinds of trouble, and that he was a perfect nuisance around here."

Jack smiled to himself, recalling Professor Grimm's allusion to the thorny route of the transgressor. He half-guessed what was up. As he neared the tool shed a hasty figure left the Academy building by a rear exit.

It was Lem Grimm, a satchel in his hand. He looked sullen and mad. He passed Jack with a frightful scowl. Our hero said nothing.

Lem struck across the grounds for the stables, probably to get the steward to drive him to the train. As he neared a low barb-wired guard to a drinking pond for the cattle, Jack saw something white cleave the air.

Spat! an egg took Lem Grimm in the back. Whiff, a second carried away his cap as he turned. Whiz, whiz — two white objects cut the air. One splattered its contents right across his face.

Blinded and enraged, Lem floundered aside, struck the barb wire stretch, tumbled over it, and came full length in the dirty water of the cattle pond.

As he arose, dripping, a chorus of yells went up from the greenery, and half-a-dozen juvenile forms scudded for the shelter of the Academy. Lem Grimm swung his satchel towards Jack.

‘Your work!’ he yelled. ‘See if I don’t get even with you yet.’

As Lem disappeared in the direction of the stables, Jack walked on to the tool shed. He came upon old Socker bending over a big lawn mower all apart. The janitor was fretting and fuming at a terrible rate.

‘Good morning, Mr. Socker,’ hailed Jack pleasantly.

‘Oh, it’s you, Ranger?’ said the janitor crossly. ‘This pesky thing is just worrying the life out of me.’

‘Something wrong with it, eh?’

‘Is there? Everything’s wrong with it. I’ve set aside to-day, when you critters are at a distance, to get some real work done, without fearing I’ll run over an explosive bomb or get a spray from a hose.’

‘Let me look, Mr. Socker,’ suggested Jack. ‘They used to tell me I was something of a mechanical genius, at home. Oh, say — you’ve got some screws missing, and that bar is all out of gear. Bring me your tools. I’ll have the old thing right in a jiffy.’

Jack loved to potter with machinery. He became deeply engrossed in the task. So, over an hour passed away before he delivered the lawn mower to Socker.

‘That’s prime,’ announced the old janitor,

"and you're first-class. You come up to my room some time, Ranger, and I'll show you a map of the battles I've been telling you about."

Socker looked after Jack fondly, as if he had found a friend and truly congenial spirit at last.

"Well, I've made one friend," thought Jack, as he hurried in the direction of the boat house, "even if the price was interminable descriptions of all those battles. Hello — I'm left!"

Jack came in view of the foot of Rudmore Lake to catch the voices of merry pleasure seekers in the distance.

Twenty or more crafts were skimming the bright blue waters fully half-a-mile away. Jack had not appeared on time and they had left him behind.

He stood disappointedly regarding the disappearing picnickers, when a brisk, light step on the gravel caused him to turn.

A stranger was approaching, a boy about his own age. He was straight as an arrow, lithe, graceful, a striking poetry of motion in every swing of his supple frame. He was dressed in ideal outing costume. His face was rather swarthy, he had long, coarse hair, but his eyes were full of expression, and he carried himself with a certain proud bearing that showed independence and fearlessness.

"Student?" said Jack, with a pleasant smile.

"Yes," nodded the other crisply. "Arrived late last night. I am John Smith."

"Oh," murmured Jack, "I reckon you are looking for what I, too, have missed — a trip to Sunset Island."

"I am going," answered John Smith in an even, musical tone that never varied.

"Walk?" inquired Jack.

"Don't have to. I brought my traps from the town by water, so I could float my canoe into service."

"Your canoe?" repeated Jack slowly.

"I'll help you get to what you are trying to put together in your head," said John Smith with a sudden smile, and linking his arm in Jack's. "Come on, I'll give you a quick paddle after the others. Does the canoe and my appearance make you think of Indians? Well, that's all right! I am an Indian."

CHAPTER XIX

THE INDIAN STUDENT

"An Indian?" said Jack with both curiosity and interest.

"Yes," nodded John Smith. "That is, a great-grand relative of mine was chief or the Alaskan Saguenoi. My father was a famous Canadian scout — Archibald Smith. He married the grand-daughter of old Lauroi, the chief.

"But you have never yourself seen much of real Indian life, have you?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, yes, I have," responded Smith promptly. "We have always lived on the border. I am an orphan. When my father died two years ago, I spent one whole summer with some Indian friends. The Canadian government paid my father a good pension. I am trying to get an education on the little fortune he left me."

Jack was irresistibly attracted by this queer new addition to the school. In everything he said or did, Smith showed an intelligent acuteness and rapidity that proved all his wits to be keenly alive.

Going along the lake a short distance, he finally

dove into a little clump of brushwood and dragged forth a light, beautiful canoe.

"You didn't bring that all the way from home?" asked Jack, admiring immensely the graceful, well-made craft.

"Why not? I packed it between four thin wood strips, and shipped it express rates. Come, I will do the paddling if you will pilot the way to Sunset Island."

"I was never there," said Jack, "but I fancy we can't miss it. This is lovely, Smith," he added a minute later, as, both seated in the frail little craft, they shot through the water with an easy, gliding motion that was picturesque and fascinating. "I'll bet you can run and wrestle all right," continued Jack, noting the splendid play of muscles as Smith did some scientific paddling.

"Some," nodded his companion with a quiet smile.

Jack greatly enjoyed the swift drive through the water. He had never dreamed what an expert could do with a paddle. The novelty of the trip was very pleasing.

They passed several small islands. Beyond quite a group of these they came in view of a larger one yet. All kinds of crafts were moored at its end. Smoke was rising here and there, and human figures were moving actively about.

"What a famous place," said Jack. "If the

fishing and bathing is up to Sam Chalmer's claim, it's simply ideal."

John Smith put in his best work with the paddle as they neared the island. There was a rush for the landing place on the part of the picnickers already arrived. This was the first time any of them had seen a canoe on those waters.

From the dainty little craft interest drifted to its owner. Jack introduced Smith to Sam, who did the same for the crowd who came up with him.

A loutish fellow whom Jack had never seen before, but whom he instinctively recognized as the original of the portrait in Sam's room — Jerry Chowden,—strolled indolently by, listened to what was going on, and said:

"John Smith, eh? I say, Smith, you poke that boat along like a real Wild West fire-water man."

"Squaw!" muttered Smith, with a contemptuous glance at the speaker. Then his eyes flashed after the retreating Chowden. The sinews of his hands knotted up. He acted as if about to start after Chowden and resent the insult, when a new figure intervened.

This was Matt Deane. He was the "Smart Aleck" of the school. His fad was football, and he wore a shock of hair that covered his head like a doormat. He was fat, a slovenly fellow with lots of cheek.

Matt stared goggling at Smith in a coarse, inso-

lent way. Then on the heels of the echo of Chowden's choice remark, he put his hand to his mouth.

"Whoo-oo-ooo-ooop!" he babbled out, in cheap imitation of a conventional Indian war cry.

"Say, you," spoke Smith, turning upon him in a flash, "I'll venture you never heard that outside a show."

"Show's good enough for me," grinned Matt, who was pretty weak at repartee.

"I'll show you the real thing," observed Smith in a steady, not at all playful tone. "I will give you a real war whoop, and — something else."

"Get out of this — quick," whispered Sam Chalmers, seeing a chance for some fun, and sliding up to Matt's side and winking to his friends. "You've insulted him. He's searching for his scalping knife."

"What?" bolted out Matt, looking scared, and passing his hand anxiously over his big crop of hair, and backing away.

John Smith was not searching for a scalping knife, however, he was tightening his belt. Then, whipping his hands to his feet he loosed his shoe-strings. Kicking off his shoes, he stood shod in a pair of light, flexible mocassins.

"Guard!" he cried in a tone clear as a bell — "I am coming."

"Stop!" bawled Matt, his hands frantically

clutching his great shock of hair. "I didn't mean anything, I —"

"Whoop!"—the cry, shrill and metallic, rang out over land and water like the scream of an eagle. John Smith, after one or two swift circular whirls, had started after his "enemy."

Matt was truly frightened. He was headed from the spot on a frantic, lumbering run. Within twenty yards Smith caught up with him.

"Don't — don't. I'm ticklish. Wow! Let up!"

Smith flew about him like a young hurricane. He darted in front of him, leapt back on him, appeared at one side of him and then the other. All the time he poked out his hands like prodding darts. So swift and strenuous were his tactics, that Matt was swept clear off his balance.

Suddenly Smith seized Matt's arm. He gave him a pull and a whirl. He got the helpless fellow on a spin that, for the life of him, Matt could not check. The momentum was terrific. Matt was now gyrating like a whirling Dervish.

"Quit. I'll fall! I'll faint! Doctor says I have a weak heart —"

"No, only a weak head," announced Smith, continuing the dizzying spin, giving his subject a final strong whirl that sent him plunging headfirst into a nest of ant hills.

The troublesome ones left Smith alone after

that. The manly fellows were taken by his spryness. The boys realized that he had the making of a first class athlete. There was some active canvassing for service by the rival baseball teams.

Matt Deane had sneaked away from the scene. Sam Chalmers had deputed Slade to follow him up. Will a little later reported him asleep in a clump of brush, exhausted by Smith's novel treatment, and probably haunted in his dreams by visions of a deadly scalping knife.

Sam immediately enrolled half-a-dozen of his closest friends, Jack included, to accompany him and see some further fun.

Details were soon completed. They stole from the general camp, and, led by Will, reached the spot he had reported.

Matt Deane, tossing in a troubled sleep, was aroused to find his hands and feet stoutly held, and a tight bandage over his eyes. As he was lifted to his feet he gave one fearful, ringing yell.

"Wagh! Ugh — Whoop — oop!" a shrill babel was poured into his ears.

"Help. I'm massacred! Murder! Oh, say, Mr. Indian, I never meant anything!"

"The deadly scalping knife!" hissed a fearful voice.

"Slice my ears, my nose, anything — but don't touch my ha-ai-air."

The appeal ended in a scream that betrayed the

scene to the others in the camp, many of whom started on a run for the center of commotion.

Will Slade had managed to get a pair of scissors. Acting as barber in general, he gathered up a fistful of Matt's hair directly at the crown.

A dozen quick snips, and there was a bald spot in the center of the victim's head that made one think of a hole in a hair cushion. The rest of his frowsy hirsute appendage suggested a tonsure.

Dolph Marvin had gathered a lot of stain berries. His hands seemed gory as, these crushed to a jelly, he plastered them down where the hair had been.

Matt made a ferocious struggle. He suddenly burst from his captors, as they intended he should. He tore the bandage from his eyes. Up to his head ran his hands.

As he noted his loss of hair he uttered a groan. As his hands came down, red-daubed and trickling, he gave out a wild screech.

"Scalped!" he screamed madly, blind to surroundings — "scalped!"

He made a dart from the midst of his persecutors, actually knocking two of them down. Those who pursued with hilarious laughter did not run far.

Matt made for the water. As he reached its edge he took not a leap, but a fly, a sprawling bolt through the air. He landed so flat, firmly and

hard across the seats of a little moored yawl, that it shot out into the water thirty feet like an arrow driven from a bow.

Then, righting himself, he seized the oars, and before his astonished pursuers could realize it was speeding for the mainland.

"Well!" commented Fred Kaler, "there goes our boat."

"Mine, you mean," suggested Bony Balmore, checking his mirth. "Say, how are we going to get home?"

"Strikes me, Matt has evened things up," remarked Bob Movel. "The others fellows will just enjoy marooning us."

"Come on," said Sam, with a hailing signal to Jack. "We mustn't be laughed at."

He borrowed a skiff. Jack did the steering. Matt was out of sight by the time they got started. His course lay among some small islets that now shut him out of view. When the boys had rounded these, however, and struck the mainland, they found no trace of the fugitive.

"Here, Jack, jump ashore and line the way south, say half-a-mile. Matt may be hugging the shore where it indents, or abandoned the yawl. I'll try and trace him north."

"All right," assented Jack.

"Whistle, which ever locates him first," directed Sam.

Jack followed the shore line for about a mile with no success. Finally he caught the echo of a distant whistle. He turned to retrace his way.

In doing this he set a diagonal course, to reach his starting place and avoid the interminable in and out zigzag of the close shore line.

"I have missed it," he concluded half-an-hour later, as he landed on the railroad, with the lake out of view. "Well, the water is east, that I know. I'll follow the shore, this time."

Jack rested for a moment on a tree stump. Casually he watched a long freight train pull into view. There was a sharp curve at the point where he sat, and pilot and caboose were both out of sight at the same time.

The train was going slowly, but increasing its speed momentarily. Jack, arising to renew his journey, heard a faint cry, and faced about to ascertain its cause.

"Mercy!" he said, in wonder and alarm, making an instantaneous run for the bulging line of freights.

Hanging by her dress, which had caught on a hook of the half-open door of a box car, there dangled a little girl about ten years of age.

Her feet nearly touched the rail, her hands were helplessly clutching the air. She swung to and fro, the mere plaything of the train's momentum.

Jack Ranger sped like the wind to her rescue, as he saw that she was suspended by the merest shred, and that any sudden jar might send her under the crushing wheels of the freight car.

CHAPTER XX

“MOOLY”

“GRAB hold!” cried Jack to the affrighted child, as he ran along the side of the train.

He wondered how the little girl had got into her present perilous predicament. She saw and heard Jack, and put up a hand in an effort to clutch the edge of the car floor. She could get no purchase to help herself, owing to the peculiar dangling position in which she hung.

The train was going at the rate of about ten miles an hour. Jack could easily keep up with it, but he had to run along the rough cindered slant at the side of the rails, giving him an unsteady, and at places, a dangerous footing.

Finally he got even with the door of the freight car. Still running, he thrust out his hands, clasped the little girl by the arms and tried to pull her free.

Jack immediately let go, for he was on the point of stumbling, and her dress was caught so tightly, and his facilities for operation so unfavorable, that he found he could not detach her in any ordinary manner.



THREW THE CHILD BACK INTO THE CAR.—Page 157.

“There is only one way,” he thought, and acted on the suggestion in his mind.

Jack drew closer to the edge of the car. He put both arms under the dangling form, lifted it bodily, and threw the child back into the car. Her dress still held, but there was no danger of her again falling out.

Placing one hand on the edge of the car floor Jack sprang lightly up beside the little girl.

“Well,” he breathed, “that’s fortunate. And just in time,” he added with satisfaction.

Just then the locomotive gave a terrific jerk and increased the speed of the train steadily. Jack saw where a door hook had caught the child’s dress tightly, detached the garment, and regarded his companion with wonder and interest. She was crying, her apron up to her eyes.

“Little girl,” said Jack, “who are you, and how did you ever come in this awful fix?”

“I am Bessie,” said the child simply, with a last sob. “Oh, what a great, good boy you are to help me!”

“Bessie who — from where?” inquired Jack.

“Bessie Lane. I live with grandma at Brocton.”

“And how did you get caught on that door hook?”

“I was trying to get out of the car.”

"What made you get into the car in the first place?" asked Jack.

"To find Mooly."

"Who's Mooly?"

"Dear old Mooly!" continued the child, getting to her feet and running unsteadily to one side.

"Oh, poor old pet, oh! oh! oh!"

Jack Ranger was more astonished and perplexed than ever at what he now saw. For the first moment he discovered that both ends of the car were divided off by a three-board barrier, leaving a space vacant the breadth of the doors.

Penned in at one end were half-a-dozen sheep. Penned in at the other end was a white-faced, gentle-looking brindle cow, neat as wax and looking sleek and well-fed.

Bessie Lane had run to the rear barrier. Over the top board, with frightened eyes a cow imprisoned beyond had thrust its head. The child threw her arms about the animal's neck, clinging there and crying as if her heart would break.

Every time she sobbed the cow would utter a plaintive "moo" in sympathy, nestling close to its devoted little friend, and licking her hands and face in a distressed way. Jack walked close to the strange friends and pulled gently at the girl's arm.

"Come, Bessie Lane," he said in a kind, friendly tone. "Don't cry, but try and tell me what all

this means. You see, we are going faster and farther away from home every minute. That won't do for me — I belong at Lakeside Academy, and you belong home."

"Oh, I can't go home without Mooly — I can't indeed!" said Bessie Lane, wringing her hands. "I ran after her just as soon as I had found out they had taken her to the cars. I begged of some trainmen to put her off, and they only laughed at me. Then I ran along the train till I found her, and got in with her. The cars started up, and when they almost stopped just now I tried to get off to go back and beg of the men again, and my dress caught. And now they've started up again. They will take Mooly to the city and kill her, and grandma will die. Why, Mooly is just one of the family!"

"How did they come to take her away?" asked Jack.

"Grandma was sick. She owed some money to Mr. Lee. She owns our home, but she was too sick to get out and raise the fifty dollars for him. He got the constable, and they came this morning and took away Mooly. Then they sold her to a cattleman. I didn't dare to tell grandma. It would surely kill her. Why, we have had Mooly since she was a wee, little calf."

"Lee?" repeated Jack, with an instantaneous picture in his mind of some soulless, money-grab-

bing shark. "I'll remember that name. In fact," he added, his lips compressing a trifle, "I think I'll have some of Sam Chalmers' crowd also memorize it. Go on, Bessie — what more?"

"Nothing more," said Bessie in a mournful tone, "only — I can't leave Mooly. Why, she would pine away if she didn't have some one to pet her, and give her lumps of sugar every morning and night. Oh, dear! oh dear!"

"It's too bad," said Jack. "Cheer up, Bessie, I think there's some way out of this pretty bad fix. You're a true, brave little woman, and deserve to get your Mooly back home."

"Oh, do you think I can — do you really think so?" cried Bessie clapping her hands in mingled anxiety and hope.

"I really do," said Jack, his thinking cap on, and going to the door and looking out. "When the train stops again, I'll soon find out for sure."

Jack fancied he could size up the situation correctly. A mean-souled creditor had taken advantage of the illness of Bessie's grandmother to secure ready payment of a claim that she could in time pay. The cow had been hurriedly seized, and sold to some cattleman who made it a business of going up and down the line buying livestock for the city packing houses.

He could imagine the peaceful homely life of the little girl and her aged relative, and realized

how much they prized poor Mooly. Jack had a good heart. All its sympathies were immediately enlisted in behalf of the little child whose life he had probaby saved.

"I've been ripe enough for fun and mischief on all occasions," thought Jack. "Let's see if I can't bring about some good in the world with just as much vim. That's good — they're slowing up."

The freight train took a siding near a little straggling settlement. There was some see-sawing, and finally the cars came to a standstill. That in which Jack was halted directly fronting a runway leading from a cattle pen in which were several sheepes and two cows.

Jack stepped out on the platform above the pen. Looking down the train he saw two roughly-garbed men climb from the caboose and to the roof, and come down the center boards in his direction.

Jack believed they were the cattlemen, and prepared to greet them in his most winning way. Sure enough, as they came opposite him they sprang down upon the platform. Just at that moment little Bessie stuck her head out of the car doorway to see what was going on.

"Howling hurricanes!" shouted the foremost of the two men, starting back in astonishment, "if it aint that little girl, again!"

"Say," said Jack at once, with a pleasant, quiz-

zical smile, "I have a friend — one Nat Anderson — given to just such volcanic expressions. He's the soul of good-heartedness. Bet you are, too."

"What's the soft sawder for, youngster?" inquired the man, with a shrewd look at Jack.

"You know the little girl, I see."

"We saw her back at Brocton, yes. How did she ever get here?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," responded Jack. "First, though — are you the man who bought her cow, Mooly, in there?"

The man nodded in a crisp, suspicious way, adding:

"What about it? All straight isn't it?"

"On your part, I am sure it is," answered Jack promptly. "The fellow who sold you the cow, though, is simply a double-dyed villian."

"Didn't think much of him myself," said the cattleman. "He charged me eighty-five dollars for the cow, after he had offered it to others for ten dollars less."

"Now, mister," said Jack earnestly approaching the man closer, "let me tell you about that little girl."

Jack was an eloquent talker when his sympathies were aroused. By the time he had concluded his pathetic little story, the cattleman was hanging his head.

“Sorry,” he muttered, “but business is business, youngster.”

“I know it,” said Jack. “Let’s get down to it. I think it will haunt you if you carry away the comfort and support of these poor people. Got any children of your own, mister?”

“Five of ’em. That’s why I can’t help you out. Confound it!” blurted the man, “I’ve got a heart, but I’ve got a family to support, too. I simply buy for a big rich company on salary. It isn’t as much a month as I paid for that animal. I can’t lose any eighty-five dollars. It would mean starvation for my family, if I did.”

“I don’t ask you to,” said Jack. “You pick up animals right along the line, don’t you?”

“Wherever we’ve bought them, yes. We are just going to take those aboard in that pen yonder.”

“Do you stop at Denton?”

“Oh, yes — that’s our main loading point.”

“All right. I’ll buy this cow, Mooly, from you.”

“You will?” spoke the man in some astonishment. “I don’t know as I have the right to sell it.”

“Oh, yes, you have. Add the freightage and a few dollars for yourself, and settle the price.”

“Well, this is a queer go!” exclaimed the cattleman. “I’ll do it. I want nothing for my-

self. I'll stand the freightage. Give me the bare amount the company paid. Honest," with a glance at little Bessie, who stood in the doorway looking up anxiously at him, "I'd give a fiver never to have dirtied my hands with this mean transaction."

Jack released his watch and chain from his vest. He took out his pocket book, and then a pencil and card.

"Mister," he said, "that watch is a keepsake from an aunt at Denton. There's about twenty dollars in cash. I will give you both. The watch cost eighty-five dollars. I will give you an order on my aunt, Miss Angelina Stebbings, at Denton, to whom you will go. Return my watch to her, and she will close the deal for cash."

"Why," faltered the cattleman, rubbing his chin reflectively, "I don't know about this."

"I have just come to school at Rudmore," went on Jack. "If you doubt about your money, just go up to the station and wire Judge Bennett, Denton, if Jack Ranger is good for eighty-five dollars."

The man glanced at the watch and money, and then at Jack's clear honest face. A further look at the pathetic little Bessie settled it.

"I'll trust your word," he burst out with force

suddenly. “You don’t look as if you’d beat a poor working man.”

“Tell my aunt the whole story,” said Jack, “and I don’t think you’ll be the loser for acting white in this matter. You’re a man, you are. Name, please?”

“Dan Garl,” and Jack wrote out the order on his aunt. The cattleman and his assistant led Mooly down the runway. With a glad “moo” the animal once more struck grass, little Bessie hanging about her neck and sobbing out her wild joy.

Jack waited till the men had driven their new livestock aboard the car, and talked a little further with the head cattleman. He waved them a friendly adieu as the train again started up. Then going down to the road where Bessie was picking long luscious clover and feeding it to Mooly, he took hold of the end of the rope encircling the animal’s neck, with these words:

“Come, little girl, we’ve won the day, but we’ve got an eleven mile tramp before we reach home.”

CHAPTER XXI

JERRY CHOWDEN'S DOWNFALL

"WELL, this is pastoral enough to suit anybody," said Jack a few minutes later.

He smiled as he wondered what his new school friends would think and say should they chance to discover him in his present predicament.

Jack had made due inquiries. Brocton was just eleven miles to the north-west, and about four miles from Washington Hall.

They had struck a dusty highway, met a farmer, and were directed to follow straight along the road they were on.

"I'm glad," thought Jack, as he walked along superbly satisfied leading, or rather, the cow following him. He missed his watch, and he would miss his money. Still he was not sorry for what he had done. Mooly plodded along chewing a sweet end of clover. Once in a while she lifted her face, seemed to scent home ahead, and made a little wriggling kick-up to show her contentment.

Bessie Lane ran along the side of the road picking flowers. She made a royal daisy chain for the cow and placed it over her horns. She looked up

timidly at Jack as if she would like to crown him, too.

It was hot and dusty. Finally Bessie lagged a little. Jack called her to his side, and she slipped her hand into his confidently and trotted along with a happy face.

At the end of three miles they came to a little settlement. The post-office was the general store. Jack found just thirty cents in his pockets. He got Mooly a cool drink, bought a cup and some crackers, cheese and cookies and they tramped on till they came across a trickling stream from an ice cool spring just off from the road.

"We'll turn Mooly loose in that grass yonder and camp a bit," he told his companion.

Bessie was delighted over the impromptu camping out, the lunch and Jack's companionable ways. Every time she lifted her timid, innocent eyes to his face, they expressed a gratitude and devotion that made Jack feel proud and happy.

"Grandma will pay you back — oh, sure she will!" prattled the little maiden. "What would we have ever done if you hadn't come along?"

Jack told her that her grandmother must not be bothered with any details until she was well and strong. He knew that as soon as the cattle man reported at Denton, his watch and chain and money would be promptly returned to him by Aunt Angelina.

Jack could imagine that good soul scolding over his "extravagant generosity" to her sisters, and then by herself blessing the opportunity of sharing in a royally good deed.

They rested till past the noon hour. If Jack had any money left he would have hired a conveyance. Having none, he decided they must plod on diligently.

"Hello, Mooly has betaken herself to pastures new," he observed, as they got ready to start up again.

The animal had crossed over a swampy patch to a green island among a nest of mud. Little Bessie stood and called her, and coaxed and scolded mildly at a distance. It was all in vain. Mooly only switched her tail gaily, and lowed at them in playful defiance.

"I see I have got to go after her," said Jack. "Bother! this is a worse fix yet."

Jack started in pursuit of the provoking bovine to land ankle-deep in clay at one spot, and up to the knees in a soft, squashy mire at other places. Nearly reaching the animal, Mooly made a dash through some thorn bushes growing on an island in the swamp. Jack followed to his disaster. He got caught among the bushes badly scratched his hands and face, and his clothing was torn in half-a-dozen places.

"I'm a pretty looking object," he ruminated,

after a spell. "I must look like a first-class tramp."

The clay with which Jack was spattered and plastered had dried to a whitish color. He was covered with the powdery dust of the road. His clothing was tattered.

About four o'clock Bessie became pretty tired. Jack suggested a brief halt, but she was anxious to reach home. Finally he lifted her to Mooly's back. The animal looked around at her and then plodded on contentedly.

"The mischief!" said Jack suddenly, as they passed a break in the woods. "It's a close shave, this near to the Academy. I don't fancy meeting any of the boys in this plight."

Jack hurried up the cow. Through breaks in the timber Washington Hall loomed up not a thousand yards distant.

"Pzznt. W-w-why, if it isn't Ja-Ja-Jack R-R-Ranger!" cried a sudden voice.

"Hello — hold on," called Jack, as Will Slade came into view from some bushes lining the road, stared at him in wonder and then put back for covert.

"C-couldn't th-th-think of it. T-t-too j-j-jolly! Hi-hi-hi!"

Will vigorously yelled, and waved his hand eagerly to some companions. The next moment a riotous group broke through the greenery.

Jerry Chowden led the crowd. With him was Matt Deane, a handkerchief tied over his shorn shock of hair, and Dolph Marvin. Jerry struck an attitude and slapped his thigh with an uproarious guffaw.

"Worse than John Pocohontas Smith!" he railed — "Jack Ranger, the cow puncher! Ha, ha, ha! Turn in there, Ranger. This is too rich for the rest to miss."

"Drop it, Chowden," ordered Jack steadily, as the bully reached for the rope, grasped it and tried to turn the cow aside.

"Hey?" growled Jerry. "Guess you don't know who I am."

"Oh, yes, I do," answered Jack carelessly — "I've seen your portrait — in character."

Jerry Chowden scowled till his brow suggested a thunder cloud. He jumped back clenching one fist. He sprang forward putting up the other.

"See here," observed Jack sharply, "this is a matter of business, not of fun. You are frightening this little child. Stand back."

"Me? Guess not!" snarled Jerry. "Well! well! well!"

Jack swept out one vigorous arm. He meant to push Jerry out of the way, and he did it. Then he urged up Mooly.

"I'll stop you, then. I'll teach you something," threatened Jerry. "Halt, Bucephalus, halt!"

Jerry ran behind the cow. He seized its tail, held hard and braced. Mooly turned one eye back the line. Suddenly she shot out one foot.

Jerry let go with a bawl. The cow's hoof had struck him full in the chest. Keeling over and over, he landed in the ditch and lay there gasping.

"Hold me!" shrieked Jerry, trying to get up, but panting for breath. "Why, I'll lit'rally smash him!"

Jack waited a minute in silence. Then his eye swept the other fellows of the crowd in turn in a meaning way. No one followed as he proceeded down the road.

Little Bessie was crying. Jack assured her he could take care of himself. About half-a-mile further on he pulled cow and rider to one side. A big phaeton had come into view. He halted 'for it to pass.

Jack bowed respectfully to its driver — Professor Grimm. The latter gave him a hard stare and a curt nod. Jack colored a trifle as he recognized the professor's companion from a picture he had seen in the Academy office.

"Dr. Henry Mead, sure," decided Jack. "What will he think of me?"

Professor Grimm's companion, too, stared at Jack. He asked his companion a question, put out his hand as to clutch the reins, then thought better of it, and turned and stared again at Jack.

“Smashed Grimm, scalped Matt Deane, public appearance — thus,” soliloquized Jack Ranger, bestowing a dismayed glance at his disordered attire. “All in twenty-four hours. Oh, it’s too much for one. I need Nat Anderson to share the honors.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A LOYAL FRIEND

"HI, Jack Ranger! I've got something for you."

Jack gave a sleepy yawn and sat up in bed. He had been aroused by Sam Chalmers, who burst into his room unceremoniously the morning of his third day at Washington Hall.

The one preceding had ended quietly. Jack had seen Mooly and little Bessie safely to Brocton. He had strenuously refused to be made a public hero of by his devoted child friend. He had seen her in sight of her home, and then hurried from the town, promising he would see her grandmother soon.

It was after dark when Jack reached Washington Hall. He was in a wretched condition, tired out, and not in a mood for explanation or fun. Jack went to bed at once. Up to nine o'clock there were summary challenges and threatenings at his door. Then the industry of Sam's cohorts subsided, and Jack slept the sleep of the just.

"All right now," he announced a few minutes after Sam's early morning arrival, as he put the

finishing touches to his toilet. "You said you had something for me. What is it?"

"A tip."

"Oh — thought maybe it was a challenge from Jerry Chowden, or a bill for damages from Matt Deane."

"Squelched — both of them," declared Sam. "Matt is sporting a skull cap, and Jerry is in the solid grumps. No, I've got only a tip for you, Ranger, but it's a valuable one."

"That so? Progress, then."

"None of my business," proceeded Sam gravely, "why you saw fit to leave us yesterday and hitch up with a cow and a girl. I guess you're naturally erratic. But what Dr. Henry Mead thinks of a promising pupil parading the public roads cow-puncher style, plastered with mud and dangling with tatters, is another thing."

"Yes, he saw me," observed Jack thoughtfully.

"Well, he wishes to see you again. Martin, the monitor, is afraid of me. I loan him money occasionally. He's got a message for you to report at nine o'clock to Dr. Mead. Gave me the hint so I could prepare you."

"What preparation is necessary?" asked Jack coolly.

"Well, Dr. Mead is a great stickler for etiquette. I don't know your pull with Professor Grimm, but you won't get off so easily with the

Prex. He was astounded, shocked, horrified at your first appearance in his sight as a new student. If a masquerade had been going on now, you might ease off. However, we've fixed it for you. Initiation, see. The C. of I. insisted on your showing your paces. Hence, your picturesque appearance. Give it to him strong, Ranger, and you'll slide out."

"I suppose," remarked Jack, "C. of I. is Committee of Introduction?"

"Quite right."

"Thanks for your suggestion, but I make it a rule never to lie," said Jack. "Your tip is of no use to me, Chalmers."

"What — will you tell him?"

"The truth."

"Suppose he won't listen or believe you?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders quietly. Just then Martin appeared and formally delivered his message. Jack went down to breakfast, hung around with the boys for a bit, and at nine o'clock started for the office.

He did not feel quite easy in his mind. As he put it to himself, things were piling up pretty fast, and he did not believe that he was popular with Professor Grimm. He faced the music with a resolute air, however, and tapped at the door of the office loudly.

To his astonishment, as it was opened by Dr.

Mead himself, Jack heard a familiar voice bolt out the vehement words:

"By heck, Dr. Mead, you're a regular hummer!"

"Thanks," Dr. Mead responded with an indulgent smile. "I don't recognize the word, but I realize you mean to compliment me."

"Why," murmured Jack, "it's Hiram Hedges!" and stared in surprise at his old friend of train and automobile experience.

Hedges stood with a big whip in his hand in the middle of the room, his round, homely face aglow with satisfaction. Dr. Mead opened the door wholly, and directed an interested rather than a severe glance at his neat, polite visitor.

"Come in, young man," he said. "Ah, I should hardly have recognized you."

"I suppose not, Dr. Mead," said Jack, with the faintest glimmer of a smile.

"Young Ranger, how be you?" demanded Hedges, his bluff tones approaching a delighted roar in their volume and heartiness. "No, you don't — easy, now. You shook hands with me once and nearly cracked my knuckles. Glad to see you. Yes, sir, Dr. Mead, as I was just saying, and as you certainly believe, this lad has reason to be proud of his slate yesterday."

Dr. Mead nodded, but he assumed a certain dig-

nity he thought to be an adjunct of his honorable province on all occasions. Then he said.

"Ranger, you provoked me severely yesterday. I am fortunate, however, in receiving a visit from Mr. Hedges, who has explained something of your extraordinary aptitude for helping others. Speaking of slates, we will wipe yours clean and begin over again."

Jack bowed silently. He was too shrewd not to discover that Hiram Hedges had made him "solid" with Dr. Mead.

"Not too Quixotic, Ranger," went on the august preceptor — "not too active in hours of relaxation. Always remember that you are a student of this great educational institution. Always endeavor to sustain its proud dignity."

"Dr. Mead," said Jack, without the quiver of an eyelash, "it shall be the aim of my life."

"Thanks," said Dr. Mead dubiously.

"He will, Doctor," broke in Hedges — "he'll make your school famous."

"I fear so — that is, I appreciate his good intentions and your sincere liking for him. I shall be glad to talk over your personal studies, Ranger, with you, day after to-morrow."

Dr. Mead dismissed both Hedges and Jack with an important bow. The old farmer, chuckling industriously, cut a dancing caper once they were

alone in the hall. Then he faced Jack very seriously.

"Young Ranger," he said, "I'm proud of you."

"That's cheering, Mr. Hedges," laughed Jack. "And why?"

"You ask the Lanes — you ask all Brocton. Did you know that old Mrs. Lane is a distant relative of my brother-in-law? Well, she is. We were both in Brocton last night. The town had little Bessie's whole story, and your name. First thing brother did was to go hunting for that skunk, Lee, to kick him, but the varmint hid away. Next thing, was to raise a puss for you."

"A what?" demanded Jack.

"Puss — p-u-r-z-e — puss — what's getting you? With the compliments of the inmates of Brocton."

"'Inmates' is good," said Jack, but, noticing a hundred dollar bill in Hedges' extended hand, he added: "Faulty in your bookkeeping, Mr. Hedges. I don't ask over payment. The cow cost me only eighty-five dollars."

"You'll take it, and there's no change passing hands in this transaction," insisted the old farmer stubbornly. "I say, Ranger, your Dr. Mead tries to look like stone and act like ice. I melted him, though. I gave him both stories — about that chap on the train, and about that cow. I heard him choke up, and I saw him moisten up about the

lids. I think he had it in for you. He hasn't, now. Come on with me. I histed in a little bundle from the farm for you and your friends."

Jack's friends, in large evidence, were hanging around the vestibule as he and Hedges descended the stairs. Sam Chalmers puckered up his mouth in a silent whistle. Dolph Marvin winked solemnly. Bob Movel nudged Will Slade, who gravely and ceremoniously stepped before the farmer.

"Pznnt! N-n-new s-s-stu-dent?" he stuttered. "W-w-welcome t-t-t-to Ru-ru-rud —"

"That'll do, sonny," nodded Hedges jovially. "You mean well, but I'm only a f-f-f-farmer. Friends of yours, young Ranger?" he continued, with an expansive swoop of his big arm across the group.

"The very best I have," declared Jack.

"Bring 'em along, then, and I'll chuck 'em a little sample of what we raise down Brocton-way."

So, the crowd trooped out after Jack and Hedges. Sam passed the word, there was a simultaneous stooping at a mulched sapling. Each one continued the tramp chewing a long straw and trying to look truly rural.

"By hen, now!" exclaimed Hedges suddenly, "if the team hain't missing. Ought to have known better, and brought chain and padlock along for such lively critters as you students."

"I see it," said Jack — "some one seems to have run your rig down the road a bit."

They soon came up with the team. As they passed a thick grove, various derisive cries reached the crowd, such as: "Hayseeds," "Cock-a-doodle-do," "Moo-oo!" and other choice imitations of familiar farmyard sounds.

"It's Jerry Chowden's crowd," explained Jack.

"Say, something's missing," said Hedges, as they neared his wagon.

"What is it, Mr. Hedges?" asked Jack.

"A bar'l — bar'l of apples. Say, you don't suppose they'd eat 'em, do you? Why — ha, ha! ho, ho!" and the sturdy farmer held his sides as he indulged in a fit of uproarious laughter.

His eyes twinkled merrily as he espied several of his recent deriders lining the shrubbery within earshot.

"What is the matter, Mr. Hedges?" asked Jack.

"Matter? Why some one has stolen a bar'l of apples out of this wagon."

"That won't do at all!" spoke up Sam Chalmers promptly. "To the rescue of the spoils, fellows!"

"Hold on," ordered Hedges. "They're welcome. You see, it was a bar'l of old windfalls. We threw 'em in the chicken yard, but the fowls wouldn't have 'em. I just piled 'em in to dump

in a widder's pig pen at Brocton on my way back."

Jack had to laugh outright as he caught sight of several of Jerry's cohorts sneaking out of hearing under cover, and looking decidedly sickish at the farmer's announcement.

"They didn't have the gumption to hist this blanket and look under the seat," chuckled Hedges. "You young fellers," he hailed to the crowd about him, "I want to tell you that this here young Ranger has been a good friend to me, and you'd ought to be proud of him."

"What is this, anyhow," demanded Bony Balmore — "a town meeting?"

"No, sir," retorted Hedges snappily, "it's a donation party. Here, you young rascals — help lift this two-bushel basket of the finest fruit raised in brother Eph's orchard."

Cheers greeted the advent from under the seat of the wagon of a big basket of luscious-looking pippins. Hedges cracked his whip for order as eager hands reached up to get the basket.

"I've arranged with your Dr. Mead," he said, "to have young Ranger bring his particular friends here down to the farm some Saturday, and stay over for the best time in your lives till Monday morning."

"Famous! Hooray! Grand old chap! Good-by! Good-by!"

Hiram Hedges drove off waving his hand

gaily. The crowd carried the heavy bulging basket of apples into the Academy grounds.

"Pzznt! T-t-th-they're g-g-going t-t-t-to r-r-rush us!" suddenly warned Will Slade.

"Who?" demanded Sam sharply, and then as he saw Jerry Chowden's gang make a break from cover in their direction, he ordered: "Make for the fountain, fellows — and hold the fort."

Soon a lively scene was in progress. The fountain was built with ascending stone ledges surmounted by a metal horse trough, and not in use at present.

Jack and Bony lifted the basket into this trough, and the others of Sam's crowd solidly surrounded the base of this impromptu fortress.

A sortie was made by Jerry Chowden's mob. Twice they stormed the enemy, to retreat in dire disaster as Jack's friends started a wedge resistance that sent their assailants pell-mell and head over heels out of the way.

Jack passed down the apples to his faithful friends, who triumphantly shied the cores in the direction of Chowden's crowd, who sulked disgruntled at a distance.

"That fellow Ranger seems to come out on top every time," muttered Matt Deane.

"Humph!" snarled Jerry, stooping to pick up his cap which a well-directed apple core had sent sailing aloft. "Well, you just wait a couple of

days, and I'll land on top of Jack Ranger like a thousand of brick!"

When Jack's friends had eaten all they could of Hedges' donation, each boy filled his pockets, and, under guard, the half-emptied basket was locked in Sam Chalmers' room.

"Hello! hello! hello!" briskly ejaculated that individual as they came down to the grounds again. "Fellows, look what's coming."

Jack followed the gaze of his companions. Coming up the rounding road towards the Academy were two cabs, nearly abreast. In one sat a fat, red-faced man, evidently a German, good health and good nature oozing out at every pore.

In the other, sitting up straight as a poker and looking most severe, was a thin, weazened man dressed like some dancing master, and too Frenchified generally to have his nationality mistaken.

"Professor Gottlieb Van Bulow Gerlach, our German teacher," explained Sam to Jack.

"The fat one, of course. And the other?" asked Jack.

"Professor Pierre St. Saens Octave Socrat, our French teacher," said Sam.

"Look at them!" derided Bony Balmore. "Wouldn't save two dollars coming in the same carriage. Wouldn't speak to each other if they had to lose their jobs."

"Fellows," suddenly ejected Sam in an eager

gasp, "the opportunity of our lives! Balmore, you haven't forgotten your wild plan of last term!"

"Eh? Oh, yes," nodded Bony, fixing his eyes speculatively on the approaching arrivals. "They got away for us too quick last term, but —"

"Balmore," said Sam impressively, "it is never too late to mend. Do it now!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE "DUEL"

WHEN the boys got back to Sam Chalmers' room they put their heads together promptly. Jack was soon apprized of the situation. He shook his head dubiously.

"It won't do," he declared. "Your theories, Bony, are all right, but you are crude as to detail."

"Give us something original, then, Ranger," suggested Sam.

"I'll do just that. Let me think. Ah, yes, I have it. If I could only get the same fine work in practical study. Order, attention, fellows."

Jack Ranger divulged his revision of Bony Baltimore's plan in mysterious whispers. There was a breathless hush and then an outburst of enthusiasm.

"Ranger," observed Baltimore, "I look upon you with the profoundest admiration and respect."

"Thanks," said Jack, "but watch out for hitches. Follow out the programme, and I will guarantee results."

"Pzznt! W-w-won't wo-wo-work," declared Will Slade.

"Why not?" demanded Jack.

"T-t-too e-e-e-la-la-elabor-elabor-la-la-la-e-e-e-pzznt! I give it up," shouted Will Slade in wild despair.

"Probably means too elaborate," said Sam. "That's the magic of the thing, boy. You get the clothes, Will, and the ropes — that's your share. We'll hitch on the rest of the machinery in due order."

So, it was settled. Jack had developed a new fun worker. The time was precious, for the study term began soon. He sent Fred Kaler out as a scout.

"Well?" asked Jack two hours later, as Fred rejoined them where they were lolling in the shade on the beach of the lake.

"S-st!" ordered Kaler with a majestic wave of his hand. "Let me get the tunes first."

Fred took out his inevitable jewsharp and began whanging away at a fine German tune. This he supplemented with a French national air.

"How's that?" he demanded with pride.

"Fine," commented Jack encouragingly.

"Well, I thought I'd stir the victims up preparatory to the sacrifice," said Fred. "I got into the room next to Professor Socrat and played over the Watch on the Rhine about thirty times. He

had a fit each time. Then I did the same turn for Professor Gerlach, only varying the programme to the Marseillaise. That big fellow almost howled. He stormed down the hall to Socrat's room, who wouldn't let him in, and Gerlach nearly banged the door down. He charged him with hiring some one to annoy him. Yes, the animals are stirred up all right."

"Very well," said Jack, "can you arrange the fun for to-night?"

"I'll attend to that," observed Sam Chalmers.

There was some more mysterious hob-nobbing. Within an hour subtle forces were at work to bring about a grand climax to the mutual animosity of the two professors.

During the preceeding term, Jack was told, the two professors had had a daily spat. Socrat sneered at the "coarse Dutchiness" of the German language. Gerlach claimed the French tongue was derived from the dialect of apes. They got to hate each other like poison, or fancied they did. Juvenile mischief fed the flames of their rancor, because it was voted jolly fun to see Socrat hopping about in a rage, and Gerlach hoarsely howling out the demoralizing affects of the French language.

For over two hours Sam "cottoned" to Gerlach, while Balmore became a bosom friend and admirer of Socrat. Each played his part well.

At dinner the two rivals glared at one another and made bitter remarks on the side.

It all ended in Sam inviting Professor Gerlach to the lodge rooms over the stables. There was to be a discussion there between two students, as to the merits of which they would value the professor's opinion. Meantime, Bony worked Professor Socrat on the same tack.

This room over the stables was quite an institution. Here the various secret societies were allowed to meet. It was a rough display at times, but, so long as the boys kept within reasonable bonds with their fun, the faculty said nothing. The main room was a pleasant hall, fitted up comfortably, with several apartments adjoining it, among these the "torture chamber" of the secret societies, and the like.

About twenty students were taken into the secret of the meeting that night. Jack and Bob Movel were the star actors. At eight o'clock most of the crowd were gathered in the lodge room. A few minutes later Sam arrived with Professor Gerlach.

The bluff, stout old German was all smiles as he was treated like some royal guest by the boys. He was given a large arm chair, a seat of honor over which was nailed to the wall a German flag Will Slade had manufactured that afternoon.

A dreadful frown, however, settled down over the big professor's ruddy face as Bony Balmore a minute later ushered in Professor Socrat. The latter was quite delighted as an enthusiastic ovation greeted him. He was escorted to a chair at the other side of the room directly opposite Gerlach, tastefully draped with the national colors of France.

"Aha!" he glowered, as he caught sight of Gerlach. "Gentlemen, I cannot consent to ze programme wiz zat per-son attendane," indicating his deadly enemy.

Bony cajoled him, and Sam managed to quiet Gerlach. The two enemies steadfastly ignored each other at once by looking directly at Bony Balmore, who now advanced to the platform to act as moderator of the meeting.

"Gentlemen," said Bony, as he tapped for order, "we have invited able critics to judge upon the merits of a class oratorical contest."

"Theme! theme!" demanded several voices in chorus.

"The Franco-Prussian War," announced Bony. "Question: Which of the antagonists in that sanguinary conflict proved the bravest and strongest?"

"Ho! ho!" chuckled Professor Gerlach. "Read dat historics, und see."

"Aha!" exclaimed Professor Socrat, wriggling about like a canary-bird,— "Ze noble resistance of *la belle* France vill be proof sufficient."

"Umph!" growled Gerlach, glaring at Socrat.

"Zoof!" cried Socrat, snapping his fingers derisively at Gerlach.

"Mr. Movel will speak in favor of the French forces," continued Bony. "Mr. Ranger will follow with the claims of the German army."

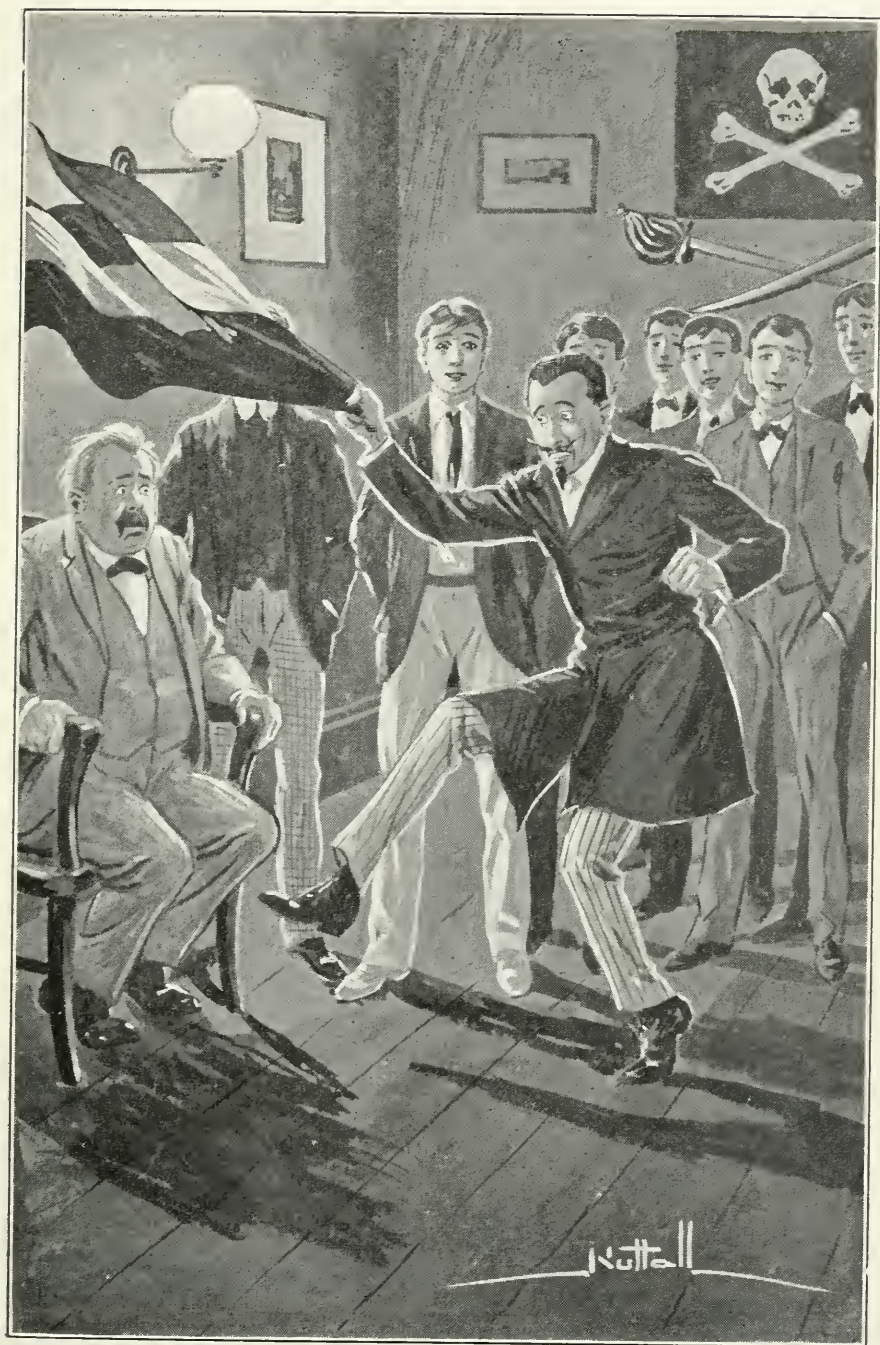
Bob Movel arose, and began reading gravely from a scroll in his hand. His introduction was a grand description of the past glories of France. He named over her famous warriors, poets and statesmen. Socrat began to beam. At the mention of Napoleon Bonaparte's name, he kissed the tri-colored flag wrapped around his chair in a wild fervor of patriotism.

"I come not for insolts!" growled Gerlach, squirming uneasily. "Dot poy Movel is in der pay of dot French government."

"Be easy, Professor," said Sam in a soothing whisper. "Your turn comes next."

Professor Socrat was all smiles as Bob completed his oration. It wound up an exordium of France in a blaze of glory. According to Bob's construction of history, the French soldiers had booted their German foes clear from Metz to Berlin.

Jack arose. He looked very solemn as if the



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destinies of the world hung on what he might say. He quoted Frederick the Great, Bismarck, Von Moltke and "Bill." Gerlach interrupted.

"Dose vos Frederick und Vilhelm," he corrected, but Jack swung on with his old familiarity. He said he was there to give facts hitherto suppressed. A remarkable narrative followed.

According to Jack, the German army took ten thousand prisoners in the first battle of the war. They shaved off the moustaches of all these. Having no cannon balls left when they got to Paris, they bombarded all the fine statues of the city with cabbages. As the farrago of nonsense continued, the little French professor grew simply frantic.

It was just as Jack completed his screed that, wrought up to the highest pitch of frenzy at the delighted guffaws of Gerlach, the excited Frenchman sprang from his seat. He rushed over to the German. Tearing the flag from behind Gerlach, he threw it on the floor and danced on it.

"Zat! and zat! and zat!" he shrieked with vociferous kickings and stampings. "Ze dish cloth — ze rag infamous!"

Gerlach's big eyes bulged. He tried to arise with a roar of rage. The chair stuck to him, being narrow. He landed prostrate, like a clumsy elephant flat under a bulky load, the chair on top of him.

"Aha — so at Metz, so at Austerlitz, so at Berlin!" screamed the delighted Socrat. "Ze noble descendant of ze robbaire barons of ze Black Forest? Paugh, poof, piff-paff! I scor-r-r-n ze rabble. Gerlach! Aha! I tell you one secret! It is not Gerlach, no no, it is Garlic!"

"Vas ist? vas ist?" bellowed the German professor, struggling to detach himself from the chair. "You call me Garlic? I vill crush him, I vill eat him!" threatened Gerlach dreadfully. "Bockbier puss-bubble unnod-sneitzerpuss! who vos he? Socrat? *Nein* — no. It vas Sauerkraut. Ha! ha! Socrat — ha! ha! nein — no. Sauerkraut. Dot vas his gorrect name."

Professor Socrat uttered an awful cry at this direful insult. He rushed to one side of the room decorated with skulls, swords, cleavers and other horrible paraphernalia of the grewsome secret societies which harbored above the Academy stables.

"I vill him annihilate!" screamed the frantic little Frenchman. "Sauerkraut! He has my honair insulted. My honair! He must fight."

"Gif me ein club!" panted Gerlach heavily. "Garlic! Aha! He shall his vords eat."

"A duel! a duel!" shouted the boys in chorus at a signal from Sam.

"You must indeed wipe out this deadly insult," whispered Bony to Socrat.

"I am retty," howled Gerlach, now assisted to his feet.

"Yes, yes — there is no other way," declared Sam. "This way, Professor Gerlach."

"This way, Professor Socrat," urged Bony, and the confused and irate rivals were hustled from the hall in the direction of the torture room.

It had been all arranged for the occasion. The torture room had been prepared. Sam pushed open a door, halting his prey at its threshold. Directly opposite, Bony ushered in Socrat at another door.

"A sword!" cried Socrat furiously.

"A plunderbuss!" shouted Gerlach.

"No, no — we will choose the weapons," declared Sam. "Here, Professor, satisfy your honor," extending an object immediately supplied by Jack.

"Here, Professor," at the same moment said Bony, pressing into Socrat's hand something furnished readily by Will Slade.

Then each second gave his principal a slight push. The doors slammed to tightly. The crowd made a rush for the steps outside, leading up to a row of bull's eyes set to view the ridiculous spectacles often presented in the famous torture chamber by candidates for initiation.

A convulsive gurgle went the rounds as the boys

gazed down at the combatants. Professor Gerlach was staring at the weapon in his hand — a big, fat, soft bologna!

Professor Socrat whipped into view his weapon. He regarded it with startled, suspicious eyes. It was a piece of flexible rattan, from the end of which dangled a great bladder filled with air to the bursting point.

"Aha!" he cried — "you suggest this, Garlic! r-r-rat! I will ze floor scatter with you."

"Sissage!" thundered out Gerlach, equally stirred up. "Dot vos goot for Sauerkraut. So!"

They flew towards one another. Then the fun commenced. The floor of the torture room was known as "the slide" among secret society victims. Smooth as glass, treacherous as ice, the instant Socrat's foot left the border on which he had stood, his feet went up in the air.

Swinging his weapon wildly, it came down under him as he took a spin. Flop — bang! he landed on it, and sat momentarily half-stunned.

A big hunk of soft, greasy bologna landed in his eye as he did so. Gerlach had also rushed forward. As he swung about his weapon, it snapped from the momentum. His feet, too, went out from under him. He fell, howled, rolled, groaned, and landed flat beside his sworn enemy.

Socrat, sprawling, kicked out at him. Gerlach,

half-arising, fell flat across him. There was a general mix up. They rolled apart from the first round.

Snap! went something, and uttering the sepulchral words: "Into the deep, dark pit of oblivion!" as per secret society rote, Sam Chalmers sprang the trap.

There was a hideous yell as Socrat disappeared like a harlequin. With terrified, goggling eyes Gerlach witnessed the occurrence. Scrambling hastily away from the aperture in the floor, he reached the only door unlocked. He pulled himself to his feet, started to fly from this den of horrors, and —

"Bumping the bumps — typical of the ups and downs of life," quoted, from secret society formula, Bob Movel in a deep, nasal drawl. "He isn't hurt," Bob assured Jack at his side. "Socrat tumbled five feet into a pile of soft buggy robes. Gerlach has rolled down about fifteen greased rubber steps into a big heap of hay."

"Out with the lights!" ordered Sam Chalmers briskly.

"And then for the second act of the programme of the night," chuckled Fred Kaler.

CHAPTER XXIV

A LIKELY SCRIMMAGE

"QUIET, there!" ordered Sam Chalmers, ten minutes later.

The boys were posted behind a hedge between the stables and the Academy. Three of them were rolling on the ground, stuffing their handkerchiefs in their mouths to keep from shrieking with laughter.

"It is desperately funny," said Jack, "but — who pays the piper?"

"That's all right," said Bony Balmore coolly. "Gerlach and Socrat won't peach. 'Spose they do? We couldn't help their turning a respectable debate into a prize fight, could we?"

"Never on your life!" asserted Fred Kaler.

Socrat had managed to find his way out of the stables. The lurking group had seen him make a frantic bareheaded dash for the Academy. He acted as though pursued by a legion of horned demons.

Now Gerlach had passed them. He was in a frightful state of mind. His ponderous body staggered. He was wiping the perspiration from

his brow in great dabs. Then he would throw his arms aloft into the air, giving expression to vast guttural ejaculations as if he was still haunted and bewildered with the rapid events of the past hour.

"Now then, fellows, for the wind up," suggested Sam. "I've got Socker and Martin fixed all right. They'll obliterate themselves temporarily on request. However, you, Meredith and Marvin, scout out close for the professors."

With a preternaturally grave and solicitous face Sam entered Gerlach's room fifteen minutes later.

The German professor sat on the side of his bed, wilted. His coat was split clear down the back. One shoe sole dangled loose. His collar was torn apart. He was still panting, and he looked up at his visitor with fishy, suspicious eyes.

"H'm! it vos you!" he growled. "You pring anoder 'gommittee' to make me von foolish — foolish, hey, Sam Chalmers?"

"Why, what are you hinting at, Professor?" asked Sam in a vast void of innocence.

"Yah! Go vay. You trick me. But"—and an expansive smile spread over the rotund face—"dot Sauerkraut got de vorst of it, hey?"

"I should say so, indeed. Only — sad, sad. Oh, Professor Gerlach," continued the wily Sam, sniffing dolorously, "I am afraid he was a very sensitive man. The humiliation — sniff — sniff

— was — sniff — too much — boo, hoo, for him.”

“Va-as?” drawled out Gerlach, regarding his visitor with growing moon eyes. “Vot you speak, Chalmers? No more foolish — foolish, now!”

“No, indeed,” sniffed Sam, his handkerchief to his eyes. “Sorry I had even an innocent hand in it. Professor, it’s a sad ending to a little fun. Socrat was so sensitive. Look, look — oh, I can’t, again. Remorse or humiliation drove him to it, and an awful slam on you — hung!”

Sam pulled the door open suddenly. There, suspended from a hook on the outside transom, was a dangling form. Gerlach with horror-haunted eyes was fairly pulled to his feet by the appalling spectacle.

The neat, nifty attire of Professor Socrat, even to the smartly polished boots, showed unmistakably. The figure swung lightly to and fro. It seemed to wave out a dire air of revenge. It mocked Gerlach.

“It seems to say: ‘Professor Gerlach, you have hounded me to my doom!’ Hu-ugh,” shuddered Sam.

Professor Gerlach uttered a last groan. He turned pale as death and collapsed onto the bed. He hid his head in the pillows, burrowing down as if to annihilate the haunting picture and his own individuality.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” declared Sam in

a ghostly whisper. " 'Driven me to my doom, driven me to my doom! ' that thing hanging there seems to say. Oh, I can't pass it. I'll climb out of the window first."

Sam, however, did pass the dangling bugaboo. He slid noiselessly to the door. In a sharp whisper he notified some lurking attendants in the gloomy corridor.

"Fetch him now — make him come."

Professor Gerlach was groaning out his agony of spirit as Jack, Will and Bob forced Professor Socrat along the hall a few minutes later.

Gerlach was mourning "his frent," compassionating his excellencies, bemoaning his own unmanly persecution of "a poor leedle Frenchman." He groaned and tossed on his bed as the boys neared the door of his room.

Past the dangling dummy they pushed the bewildered Socrat. Still more astonished was the professor, as he listened to the remorseful self-reproaches of the squirming Gerlach.

"He thinks he has driven you to suicide," whispered Sam into the Frenchman's ear.

"You hang me in effigy!" cried Socrat warningly. "Me?"

"Vas ist? Mein frent — alive!"

At hearing the Frenchman's voice Gerlach bounded from the bed. He swooped down on Socrat, he gathered him in his arms.

"Alive!" he shouted hysterically. "Ha, ha,

mein frent whom I have aboosed, forgive, forgive. Sauerkraut? nein — no. Socrat. An honored name, an ancient name. It came from the famous Socrates. Oh, I am relieved — I am happy. It vos dose rasgals. Get oud! It vos dose villians. Go!”

Gerlach seized a pillow. It helped hurry Sam Chalmers from the room.

“Quick. Ve rush them,” cried Gerlach. “Give it to dem goot. The rasgals make all de droubles,” and rushing to a corner Gerlach seized two of his walking sticks. He pressed one into Socrat’s hand.

Gerlach made a rush for the mob in the hall. They scattered like chaff, making the air a babel of class yells and laughter. Outsiders came to the doors of their rooms to ascertain the cause of the sudden tumult.

Gerlach never landed one of the original crowd. He did, however, deal some miscellaneous blows on innocent outsiders. Jerry Chowden, poking his inquisitive face past the door jamb, got “a socker.” Will Slade stutteringly related later that it sounded like a clump of mud striking a drum head.

Later the crowd learned that, springing also to the pursuit, Professor Socrat had met the rebound of the dummy hanging in the doorway. Gerlach had swept it outward in his mad rush. Swinging

back, it had struck Socrat, knocking him into the room head over heels.

"Well?" asked Jack, twenty minutes later, as Bony Balmore entered to report a last scout to his comrades in Sam Chalmers' room.

"Say," said Bony, "you ought to see them. Thick as bees. They've made it all up, and vow vengeance on us. Gerlach is jolly with relief and friendliness. He receives "par-done" from his dear friend, then he sings a song running like this: "On der nort side, on der sout side, frizzley-iddlety-tiddlety-di-dum. On der inside, on der outside, singing Moontay, Tuesday, Vednesday, Turs-tay, Fritay und Sitterday, frizzley-iddlety-tiddlety-di-dum.'" He was making Socrat a present of two neckties when I retired from the keyhole."

"You see, fellows," said Jack, smiling, "we have done some good in the world—made those two life-long enemies fast friends."

"Uh-huh," growled Bob Movel, "but say, wait till we get in their classes. Won't they soak the extra lessons to us for this bit of mischief!"

Jack went to bed feeling he had received a full measure of fun for one evening. Next morning a package from home contained his watch, chain and a sum of money. Aunt Angelina wrote that Nat Anderson would arrive at Washington Hall that afternoon.

Jack was so full of the expected arrival of his chum, that he haunted the road to Rudmore. About two o'clock Matt Deane came towards him from the timber lining the highway.

"Say, Ranger," he spoke, "you're wanted, if you want to know it."

"Who by?"

"Jerry Chowden."

"Oh," said Jack, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "Go back and tell him I'm busy just now."

"Afraid, eh?" sneered Matt.

"I reckon not," answered Jack, promptly arising from the tree stump where he had been watching down the road. "What should I be afraid of?"

"Him — he's got it in for you."

"Why?"

"Go and ask him. He says you owe a meeting to him. Confidentially, I wouldn't flunk, Ranger," continued Matt. "Take your place by taking the licking every fellow has to get before passing him by."

"I think I will go and see your Jerry," said Jack coolly. "Is it far?"

"Just beyond the brush yonder."

When Jack came into a little clearing, he found Jerry with half-a-dozen cohorts sparring. Jerry was in his shirt sleeves and belted approvingly.

"Hello," he nodded to Jack. "Just wait your turn, and I'll finish you up."

Jack laughed outright. He voted Chowden the brashest bully he had ever met. Jerry batted one of his companions all around an improvised ring.

Then he leaned against a tree, crossing feet and hands, and assuming a brow-lowering, professional attitude as he sized up Jack.

"Time," he observed suddenly. "Strip, Ranger."

"What for?" inquired Jack.

"To take your medicine. Threshing-out day for me, and I want to finish up all the odd jobs. I owe you one for letting that cow kick me. Got to lick you. It's in the record."

"Sorry to disoblige you," said Jack quietly, "but I see no real grievance, Chowden."

"Then I'll make one — there!"

Chowden was quick, but Jack was quicker. One plunged with a closed fist. The other dodged.

"Where?" asked Jack, with a laugh.

"Time, I tell you!" shouted Jerry, infuriated at his fiasco and some snickering among his cohorts.

"I won't fight," declared Jack, "where it is such utter folly as in the present case. All the same, I won't let you batter me, Chowden."

"Time, I say. Keep in the ring. Make him, fellows," shouted Jerry.

"All right," said Jack. "If you want to tire yourself out on me, start in."

Chowden was double Jack's weight, but he was clumsy on his feet. On the contrary, Jack was as light as a feather. He was sparring only to escape punishment and exerted considerable science. The result was a dozen wasted blows on the part of Jerry.

"If I ever hit you!" panted Jerry, becoming tired out and ugly.

"I assure you I shan't let you, Chowden," laughed Jack lightly.

Jerry made a hot spurt. Jack parried every blow, leading him a fine, disappointing chase round and round the ring.

"Stand still!" roared Jerry, beside himself, as with a clumsy punch he lurched clear off his balance. "Hold him — make him fight!"

"Why, you sneaks!" cried Jack indignantly, as he found his feet pinioned. Two of Jerry's friends had suddenly seized him about the knees. Jerry's eyes flashed with venomous satisfaction.

"Now then!" he gloated. "I'll — oh!"

Jerry had run into Jack's fist. His nose fairly cracked. Frenzied with pain, he advanced on Jack, swinging out his arms like battering rams.

Jack dodged back, but, firmly imprisoned at the

feet, could not exert his best strength by any means.

"You are a coward," he cried, as Jerry delivered a stinging blow on his cheek. "It's bang and batter, is it? All right! One, two three!"

Quick as lightning he struck out. Jerry yelled with pain. Then he sailed in for revenge, banging, swinging, and all Jack could do was to dodge the heaviest blows. Jerry ran back preparatory for a final mighty rush forward.

"You cowards!" rang out a hot, angry voice, clear as a bell. "Three to one, and that one my chum. Scatter, you mean skunks!"

Several voices rang out in pain. Nat Anderson had arrived. Kicking flat in turn the two fellows holding Jack's feet, he sprang towards the astonished Jerry.

"Come on," shouted Nat. "I've got the strength of twenty men in me. I'm fighting mad. Three to one! Oh, you wretched poltroon!" Biff! biff! biff!

Before a cyclone of blows Jerry Chowden staggered back like a whipped cur. He was all worn out by Jack Ranger's tactics. The indignant Nat never let up till he had toppled his adversary into a brambly bush.

"Come on, Jack," he said, his eyes flashing a general challenge to the cowed mob; and arm in arm the reunited chums struck out for Washington Hall.

CHAPTER XXV

THE "OUTCASTS"

"THESE are the strangers, worthy Guide?"

"Right, most Worshipful Chief."

"What seek they hither?"

"The mysteries, the terrors and the soul-searchings of the august Order of the Outcasts."

"Stranger, you are now past the threshold of this most grand and secret order. The ordeal will begin. You will scale the dizzy heights of courage, you will descend into the dark despair of Erebus. Let the grand march begin. Guide, proceed with the long, hard journey."

"Sam Chalmers is the Most Worshipful, and that is Fred Kaler grinding out the dismal dirge on the mouth organ," whispered Jack Ranger to Nat, with a nudge.

There were two secret societies at Washington Hall: the Outcasts and the Mudlarks. They alternated in using the lodge rooms over the stables. This was "Outcasts" night, and Jack and Nat had just started in on their initiation.

The Outcasts comprised Sam Chalmers' crowd, just as the Mudlarks were made up of Jerry Chow-

den's cohorts. Further, the same two sets were rivals in the athletic field. Nat had been accepted as a loyal Chalmerite two minutes after Sam had set his eyes on Jack's brisk and sprightly chum.

The lodge room had been duly adorned for the occasion. Wherever it would show effectively a grewsome skull was planted. Two grinning skeletons guarded as many doors. The lights were turned low. The various officers of the society were attired in black robes and wore masks.

"Let the strangers remove their sandals and be blindfolded," ordered the Worshipful Chief, and this was done.

Both Jack and Nat had been pretty nearly through the same experience at Denton Academy. The hard "Highway of Life" was easy to them. This part of the programme consisted of being pulled over canvas logs stuffed with wood. They ascended the "Ladder of Fame" without a tumble.

Then came "the slippery room," "the descent of Avernus," i. e., a drop through the trap door of the torture chamber, the beheading operation, or being struck over the neck with a warm pad of putty, and the like. Jack and Nat entered into the full spirit of the occasion, making it funny to purposely please the club fellows.

"The final act," announced the Worshipful Chief at last. "Guide, lead the way to the hot

burning desert sands. Strangers, this is the supreme test. You must cross the arid desert without flinching, or forever prove unworthy the name of Outcasts."

The "Sands of the Desert" was an invention of Bony Balmore for which he had taken great credit.

The floor of a room had been entirely removed. Fitting into the space thus voided, there had been set an immense shallow zinc pan. This pan was filled with sand about two inches deep. Beneath, some gas gets played, heating the zinc surface to an unbearable temperature.

The sand thus grew stingingly hot. It did not burn at all badly, it simply stimulated the victim till his "Ouches!" and hoppings about brought down the house in roars of jolly laughter.

"Now for the real fun," exclaimed the expectant Balmore in an audible whisper.

"Pzznt! W-w-watch 'em s-s-sq-irm!" chuckled Will Slade.

"Having an inkling of this," murmured Jack to Nat, "let us proceed with dignity and leisure."

"Advance," ordered the Most Worshipful in a sepulchral voice.

The guide gave the victims a push on to the burning sands. Jack and Nat trod squarely, slowly forward, they halted and looked as if some one had missed his cue, and kicked the burning

sand around disdainfully. They stood still, defying gas jets and heated plates like true salamanders.

"It is enough," said the Most Worshipful in a dejected and suspicious tone.

"The mischief!" muttered Bony Balmore. "Some way, Ranger has been too smart for us."

"The strangers may retire from the burning sand," again ordered the Most Worshipful.

"But we rather like it here," asserted Jack coolly, balancing on his heels.

"Remove the blindfolds," said the Chief, and Jack and Nat, serenely grateful for the asbestos soles they had pasted on their feet before coming to the club, smilingly glanced along the row of rather glum faces confronting them.

"Strangers, you have proven most worthy thus far," continued the Chief.

"Give them the second degree!" cried a member's voice.

"It shall be done. Brothers, let the procession form. The strangers shall emphasize their defiance of fire by going through the funeral pyre test."

To the time of a hideous tom tom, banged on by Kaler, the mob escorted the initiates from the lodge room, across the campus and into the timber bordering the lake.

Several bore torches, and all tried to look dreadfully awesome and important. They finally

reached a railroad cut. About fifty feet away from the tracks there was a heap of old dry railroad ties, piled up symmetrically like a house structure.

Again Jack and Nat were blindfolded. Then they were lifted over inside the log structure. They were tied hand and foot and placed flat on the ground.

"Strangers," again spoke the Chief, "the funeral pyre will be set ablaze. As the flames roar and roll, recall your mockery of the hot desert sands, and repent. Within half-an-hour we shall return. Let your silent torture be passed in reflection. Let the cremation proceed."

"Horrors!" gasped Jack in a chuckle.

"Wake me up when I'm roasted through," snickered Nat.

There was a sudden crackling, and some heat fell over their faces. Then they heard the procession retire to the dismal beating of the tom tom.

Two minutes later a subdued but lively whistle sounded. The top logs moved. A form rustled close to the prisoners. Dexterous hands removed their blindfolds and severed their bonds.

"Quick, out of this!" ordered their rescuer. "Toss in the basket on the ground outside."

"John Smith, you're a jewel!" commended Jack. "When your turn comes, we'll do as much for you."

John Smith had been taken into the confidence of the chums that afternoon. The Outcasts had lit a big brush pile near the heap of ties. Its proximity and the solitude would have been quite impressive, had not Jack and Nat known what was coming and arranged to conquer the situation.

They dashed off into the darkness of the woods after tossing in the basket Smith had indicated. This was full of old bones. The clever Indian boy arranged these artistically. From under the base logs here and there stuck out ominous-looking knuckles, joints and flat bones, bovine, it was true, but quite ghastly in effect.

Smith leaped over the barrier and ran to a tree where he had placed a gallon can of kerosene. He proceeded to deluge the ties with this. Then flinging the can aside, he brought a blazing piece of wood from the brush pile and threw it against the logs.

The ties flamed up magically. Ten minutes later the original procession approached the spot in solemn state, and suddenly broke ranks in wild confusion.

"Thunder!" shouted Bony Balmore, tearing off his mask. "The ties are all on fire!"

"Say, this is serious!" panted Fred Kaler, making a wild dash for the spot.

The crowd began to look scared. The ties were a solid mass of seething, roaring fire.

"Oh," shouted Bob Movel, with a ghastly stare discerning a protruding bone — "they're gone up, sure!"

They grabbed up big forked limbs and attacked the heap of ties. They soon had them scattered about. Sam Chalmers looked quite anxiously at the spot where they had disposed of the strangers.

"More bones," said Bob, poking out a big one. "Say," he shouted uproaringly, "it's a sell! I'm far enough along in physiology to know that this bone belongs to a cow."

"Or a mule," muttered Sam, in rare disgust. "Fellows," kicking aside the empty kerosene can he had accidentally stumbled over, "it's a put-up game, and Jack Ranger and Nat Anderson have got the best of us!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PILLOW FIGHT

"HOWDY fellows!" nodded Jack Ranger, smiling sweetly.

"Speaking of desserts," observed Nat Anderson with a radiant grin, "this is quite so-so."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Sam Chalmers.

"Jack Ranger," said Bony Balmore severely, "you are either awful lucky, or awful smart."

"Both, maybe," chuckled Nat, waving a chicken wing in one hand in a satisfied, delighted way, and reaching with the other for a luscious orange on the table before him.

When Jack and Nat had been rescued by John Smith, they had made a detour of the woods. Reaching the campus, they had seen the solemn procession file back in the direction of the funeral pyre. Then straightway they had made for the lodge rooms.

They found it deserted, as expected. The banquet hall, provided with the little refreshments always following an initiation was speedily located. Now in possession, they smiled gaily at the bored, humiliated group who had burst in upon them.

Jack braced his tilted foot on the edge of the table, moving leisurely two and fro as he indulged in a big square of fruit cake. Nat had caused devastation among the dainties before him.

"Join us," invited Jack coolly.

"Quite so," nodded Nat graciously. "We don't know who pays for this spread, but he's a famous *bon-vivant* whoever selected it."

"Ugh! go back home," growled Bony Balmore.

"Not till we teach you a few real bright stunts," declared Nat. "A toast: Bony and the bones!"

"Another one," chirped Jack: "May we ever be united — the ties that bind!"

"Let up!" cried Sam. "You just wait till bedtime."

"You're right," grinned Bob Movel. "Study term begins to-morrow. You fellows begin to-night."

"We won't flinch," promised Jack confidently. He winked openly at Nat as he said this, and Sam regarded this manœuvre with new suspicion and mistrust.

"Well," he observed, "you're full fledged Outcasts now without any further formalities."

"Thanks," bowed Jack. "We'll try and be worthy of the honor. Come, fellows, no wet blankets — pitch in and eat."

"Pzznt! Ha! ha! ha!" sniffled Will Slade. "W-w-wet b-bl-bl-blankets. H-hold me!"

"Thanks," again bowed Jack solemnly, fixing a significant glance on Will. "I take the hint."

The others soon recovered their poise and comfort under the sunshine of Jack's friendly ways. The latter told them how he had picked up a secret programme of the initiation lost by some member of the Outcasts.

"Forewarned,—forearmed you know?" he suggested brightly. "Naturally took precautions. The 'Slide for Life'!" he added cleverly, shying a fudge down the table to Nat.

"'Descent of Avernus!' quoted his ready co-partner, catching it on one set of fingers, striking them with his other hand, landing the dainty square in his mouth, and bolting it without a wink.

This night, the last before term day, was one of special license for the students of Washington Hall. From time immemorial it had been given over by the faculty for free range to the students. They retired when they liked. It was the one evening of the year when the new students were invariably put through "a course of sprouts" by the old students.

The banquet broke up about half-past nine. Jack and Nat went to the room they mutually occupied. Jack locked the door.

"Now then, Nat," he said, "in about half-an-hour they'll call for us. Get ready."

"Oh, the pillow fight in the dormitory?"

"Precisely. That's the light end of it, though — that's only a ruse to get us out of the room here, while they ransack it. Now, I've posted you, Nat — take warning — and prepare."

"Oh, yes," nodded Nat, going to his suit case. "I understand."

Both were busy about suit cases and wardrobe for about ten minutes. When a gleeful mob headed by Sam Chalmers came down the hall, they were ready to join them.

Twelve of the old term leaders gathered in as many of the new students. All were in night garb. The white-robed coterie filed into the dormitory.

A part of this only was in use. The little fellows slept here. They had fled in a group to the security of a corner row of cots, and sat up there eagerly awaiting the fun of their elders.

Then hot and heavy riot was begun. The old term boys "rushed" the new scholars. Fellows were tossed in blankets, hoisted from bed to bed. They were pummeled and gagged with pillows until they cried "Enough!"

Jack, Nat and John Smith lasted the longest. They made a barricade of several cots. Using these as a platform at times, they repeatedly drove back Sam, Bony, and six others of their party.

"Pin 'em to the wall. Load up with plenty

of ammunition," ordered Sam, in a final sortie. "Now then, fellows — to the attack!"

"Whoof!" "Murder!" "Get off my head" — these and similar ejaculations greeted an onslaught of the assaulting party. At a word from Jack, Nat and Smith had joined him in rushing forward with a double mattress. They halted for nothing, sweeping down the enemy like tenpins. They piled two other mattresses on top of them, captured their "ammunition," and retreated the triumphant possessors of two-thirds of the pillows in the dormitory.

"Never say die!" yelled Sam, again leading the van.

"Leave Chalmers to me," suggested Jack. "Give it to them hot and heavy boys."

Jack fired pillow after pillow with gatling gun rapidity. He deluged Sam. It was biff! biff! biff! till Sam staggered, pulled Bony down, and quick as lightning they were covered with two mattresses, on which Nat danced a hilarious jig.

Flushed, jolly and satisfied, the pillow fighters adjourned. The minute Jack got to their room with Nat, he swept his hand significantly around it.

"You see," he observed — "every stitch of clothing gone. In the morning they'll toss some old overalls over the transom. They'll line the hall ready to bawl us down, thinking we'll go to

breakfast even if we have to wear the old misfits."

"Which we wont have to do," chuckled Nat. "Say, who occupies the next room. I hear some suspicious rustling and whispering in there."

"You do, Nat," nodded Jack, with a smile. "No one occupies it. Some of Chowden's friends have been intermittently occupying it most of the evening, though, as I took the trouble to find out. Look here, Nat — quietly, now!"

Jack moved to the side wall of the room. He pointed to a hole near an old plugged up gas jet. This was not particularly noticeable, and, viewed casually, would be taken as the resting place of a disused gas pipe.

"Well?" queried Nat. "What of it?"

"This much," answered Jack, taking a long thin rubber tube from under the bed. "I attach it here — yes. I put its end in this other hole — see — which I made to-day. When they turn on the water to spray us, the water obliquely goes along my attachment hose, and I play them good and strong through that hole I made. How's that?"

"Famous."

"Out with the lights," ordered Jack suddenly. "They are about to begin operations."

There was a fumbling sound on the other side of the room wall, then a hissing splutter. Jack

slid his hand along the tube and glided to the hole he had made. He pushed the hose end through this.

"Say — hold on!"

"Whew! I'm getting doused."

"Turn her off! turn her off!"

Hiss, splutter, splash! Jack nobly stood at his post, twisting the hose so it would play all over the room beyond. Amid prodigious concern and astonishment they heard the would-be disturbers of their nightly peace rush precipitously from the next room.

The boys got to bed, but they did not sleep much. At eleven o'clock some one threw some old clothes over the transom. The end of a tremendous horn followed, sounding a blast that would have startled a sleeper into fits.

An hour later some one climbed the trellis outside, and let loose four frightened chickens into the apartment. These Jack cornered in a closet, and there were no further demonstrations until daylight.

The big hall gong was sounding half-past six as there came a hiss through the keyhole.

"Hey, there, you fellows — get up!"

The invitation was repeated strenuously by several voices. Jack got on a chair and glanced down into the corridor.

"Many there?" asked Nat.

"About twenty. Now then, Nat, your prettiest."

"Whoop! Here they come. Why—"

The yells were suddenly hushed. In dumb-founded disappointment the expectant mob saw Jack and Nat, neatly arrayed in suits they had hidden in the bed, sail down the hall.

"This is simply bitter!" ejaculated Bony Baltimore.

"Fellows, roared Sam Chalmers desperately, "I here and now offer a reward of two baseball bats and an air gun to the man who catches Jack Ranger right."

"Pzznt!" said Will Slade dismally. "You w-wi-will wh-wh-wwhen you c-c-catch a w-w-we-we-weasel asleep."

CHAPTER XXVII

“PLAY BALL!”

SAM CHALMERS sat in his room with a decidedly glum face. Jack came in with his usual turbulent activity.

“Hello, old fellow!” he hailed — “why, what’s up?”

Sam fixed a desperate look on Jack’s friendly face. Then he began scratching one hand and then the other. Jack stared in wonder.

“Why, Sam,” he exclaimed, “your hands are a sight!”

“Jerry Chowden.”

“Eh?”

“That’s so. It’s a low-down, mean trick. In fine condition for the first game of the season, ’aint I?”

Sam put out his hands for a closer inspection. Growing surprise and mystification were shown in Jack’s low, prolonged whistle. From the wrists to the finger-tips Sam’s hands were mottled with little pimples. These were in minute hundreds, grouped somewhat like a burn or a cold sore on the lips. All the time, in an irritated, tantalized

way Sam kept rubbing and scratching the afflicted members.

"I don't think I quite understand this," observed Jack slowly.

"All right," jerked out Sam quite snappily. "It's easy. To-day is the first game of this term's base ball series?"

"Yes," said Jack.

"You saw us in prime condition at practice last night — the whole team, didn't you?"

"Best on earth."

"And now — look," ordered Sam, waving his hands about. "Why, that awful itching would make me scratch if it was a ball of gold I was holding. Besides that, the fingers are getting stiff and sore. Bony is in the same fix. It's a case of lay off. Will Slade has just gone to ask Dolph Marvin, the umpire, to cancel or postpone game one. I doubt him doing it, he's so under Chowden's thumb, drat 'em. They'll force the play. Bony and I are the best strength of our team, if I do say it myself, and we'll lose, that's all."

"Suppose you do, this once?" suggested Jack.

"Just this: the winner of the first game always gets a sort of prestige. Itch, itch, itch, itch! scratch, scratch, scratch! Confound it, anyway!"

Sam flounced about the apartment like the victim of a thousand mosquito bites. The next minute Will Slade burst into the room.

“N-n-n-no-n-n-no-u-u-use,” he reported, shaking his head vigorously. “M-M-Marvin s-s-said he’d t-t-think of it. Ch-Ch-Chowden s-s-said he w-w-wouldn’t. G-g-game g-g-goes.”

“Of course it does!” flared out Sam savagely. “Ginger! I have a good mind to fire straight into Chowden’s room, accuse him publicly of hocussing us, and giving him the drubbing the low sneak deserves.”

“I may remind you, if you please,” suggested Jack, “that I’m all at sea as to what Jerry Chowden has done.”

“Done?” roared Sam, flinging out like a caged lion. “Why — no, let Bony tell you. He’s coming.”

Baltimore was coming, unmistakably. Jack heard him threshing down the hall. He was indulging in muffled mutterings of direful import, talking of “snakes, sneaks, and assassins.” His face was a thunder cloud as he rushed into the room. Then scratch, scratch, scratch! just as Sam had done he kept up an incessant digging with his finger nails.

“Did you see Professor Gales?” inquired Sam at once.

“Yes, I did,” snapped out Bony.

“What did he say?”

“First, that it might be poison ivy. Then, when I intimated my suspicions, he looked over

my hands closer, and laughed. 'Boyish trick'—and he named some outlandish chemical powder, and told me how some one must have dosed our soap with it. Said billiardists used it when they wanted to cripple some antagonist. Scratch, scratch, scratch — wow! "

Bony flung himself frantically on the bed and chewed the pillow in frenzy.

"Says get some vaseline, mix it with burned flour, and the itching will go away in about two days. Not dangerous, he says — only annoying," he added.

"I am dangerous, though!" shouted Sam. "No one but Jerry Chowden would think up such a measly trick. I'll get him, now you mark me. We'll play with a crippled force, we'll take our beating all right, but before another moon I'll give Chowden a Roland for his Oliver that will make the world stare. Oh, come in. Join the party of Job and his friends. Wow! I'm mad enough to eat somebody."

John Smith and Nat entered the room. The story was told all over again. Nat fired up instantly. He was for mobbing the Mudlarks, en masse.

"Say," he suggested, "I can catch all right. Can't I sub for Bony. And say, further, what's the matter with Jack, here? There never was a better pitcher."

“If he can handle the ball as he did those pillows the other night, he’s all right,” declared Sam, beginning to look hopeful. “We never thought of you fellows, the team being full.”

Bony sat up, interested. Then John Smith modestly remarked that he thought he might hit a ball. Certainly, he could run. They all knew that. Sam brightened up, and made a new slate. The word was passed around for the other club members.

They caught a Chowden scout sneaking outside the door, bent on learning the temper and plans of the Outcasts. They sent him back to Jerry blubbering, after mixing a pint of water and some flour through his hair.

Chowden looked sneaky when the game was called that afternoon. He grinned with triumph, however, as he noticed that the two crack players of the rival team were on the retired list. He sneered when one of his cohorts named the substitutes and volunteers.

“If they were the best players in the world, they couldn’t make a hit till they got onto my curves,” he bragged to his fellows.

“Thunder! that don’t look like it,” said Dolph Marvin, ten minutes later, when Jack Ranger sent so hot a “liner” to center, that the pitcher fumbled the sphere and stuck his crippled fingers into his mouth.

But if there was astonishment for the Mudlarks at Jack's telling stroke, they looked cheap and scared when it came John Smith's turn. The lithe splendidly-trained Indian boy ran the bases like a cyclone. It was fairly a fly. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. Jerry caught one of his own crowd heartily cheering the magnificent dash to home base, and "biffed him" into subjection and silence.

With four runs to their score, and filled with confidence and enthusiasm, Jack took the pitcher's place. This was his element, as he now showed to his comrades for the first time. Jerry got rattled. Jack schemed for fouls, outstrikes and errors. On the third inning the game showed eight to nothing in favor of the Outcasts, and Sam Chalmers was beaming. Bony could not keep still. He would scratch a bit, and then give out a ringing howl of satisfaction and delight.

"What you hanging on for — a whitewash?" grinned Fred Kaler, at the end of the seventh inning.

Jerry Chowden gritted his teeth at the triumphant questioner, and hissed out his violent rage and disappointment. John Smith, pleased and excited at the praise he had won for doing his level best, came up to where Jack was talking with Sam and Bony Balmore.

"Say, fellows," he observed, consulting his watch, "I've got to leave you."

“Eh? Hold on. That won’t do,” exclaimed Bony.

“Oh, yes,” smiled Smith. “There’s only two innings left. The Mudlarks couldn’t possibly make a show, now. Let some one take my place. Really,” and Smith glanced again at the time-piece, “I’m due. Got an important date.”

“Can’t you be back soon?” asked Sam.

“I think so. Sort of mysterious appointment,” explained Smith, drawing out a half-folded note from his pocket: ‘3:30 prompt.’ And I’ve got only five minutes.”

He started away as Sam sent for one of the new students to act as his substitute. It proved to turn out just as Smith had predicted. The Mudlarks got deeper and deeper in the mud. At the end of the ninth inning they stuck there — white-washed.

It was a grand victory. Kaler quickly organized a bazoo and jew’s-harp band. Then a procession was formed, Sam and Bony in the lead. As the crowd passed their sullen rivals they scratched significantly, and this made Jerry’s crowd feel meaner than ever. At six o’clock they hid away, concluding they were not having much fun or honor in life, while the Outcasts were on a jolly tangent most of the time.

Just after supper a big hayrack wagon drove up to the edge of the campus. A brawny, good-natured farm hand was in charge. The wagon

belonged to Hiram Hedges' brother-in-law, Eph. Dr. Mead had agreed to let Jack and his friends spend Saturday and Sunday at the farm, as per the special invitation of Hedges.

The list had been made out to include Jack, Nat, John Smith, Fred Kaler, Bob Movel, Bony Balmore, Will Slade, and Sam Chalmers. The five latter came swinging out of the vestibule with a wild hurrah. They had a few necessary belongings made up in neat parcels. Fred had got hold of an old cornet. He made the echoes ring as he sounded the various army trumpet calls.

"Where's Smith?" inquired Jack, as he glanced over the riotous mob in the wagon.

"I didn't see him at supper, either," said Nat.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Jack—"we don't want to miss the daylight drive, and I don't like to go without him. Hunt him up, Nat, will you?"

Nat came back to the campus in about ten minutes. If Jack had not been so taken up with the starting expedition, he would have noticed a certain subdued manner on the part of Nat, that, not being at all natural with his lively chum, should have aroused his suspicions that something was wrong.

"Not in his room. No one has seen him since the ball game," reported Nat. "I left word with Martin, the monitor, to watch out for him and send him on to the farm when he showed up."

“On foot?” said Jack.

“Oh, that little dash is nothing to Smith,” put in Sam Chalmers. “Don’t forget he’s a true Indian runner.”

“That’s so,” assented Jack. “Wonder where he is, though. His ‘mysterious date’ seems to have kept him for a long time.”

Pandemonium broke loose as the wagon started off. Chowden’s mob were in ambush down the road. Sam, however, had got wind of it. When the ambushers started to pelt them with potatoes and turnips, Sam’s party were prepared to give them as good as they sent, and a little better.

Once free from the Academy grounds, the group sang, yelled, teetered and hustled each other all over the wagon. They hailed passersby, scared livestock in the meadows, and woke up drowsy farm hands.

Then plans were discussed for passing the next day, for playing tricks on their hosts. They voted Jack Ranger a trump, and Hedges was unanimously dubbed “Uncle Hi.”

It was just dusk as, to the time of a swinging, rollicking college glee song, they drove into the front yard of the farmhouse.

Hedges appeared, wearing a necktie and choker. His brother-in-law, Ephraim Tibbs, came behind him grinning a welcome. On the porch were his family and the farm hands.

"Order in the ranks!" roared Hedges, bound to play master of the ceremonies. "Gentlemen, we deliver over to you metaphorically the keys of the place. We have doubled the insurance for the occasion, and fortified our own sleeping quarters with padlocks and shot guns. The telephone is fixed to call up the Brocton police force or fire department at a minute's notice. Now then, sail in and enjoy yourselves."

"Three cheers for Uncle Hi!"

"And Uncle Eph!"

"And all their family!"

"More! more! who wants more — no more, some more, Rudmore! Rudmore! Ball! Ball! Washington Hall!"

There were two great swings dangling from some giant oaks. There were home-made hammocks. On the old farmhouse porches there were rockers galore. From the porch and near trees hung a lot of paper lanterns. Somewhere Uncle Eph had got a locomotive headlight. Some neighbors with their children were coming down the road. Jack took in all this at a glance.

"Here, Sam," he said quickly, after courteously presenting himself and his comrades to the family on the porch. "There's just the loveliest layout there for a lawn party. We'll postpone active celebration till to-morrow, and try and entertain these people. What say you?"

“So say we all of us!” sang Bob Movel, with a caper. “Lucky I brought my amateur conjuring outfit along with me!”

“And I’ve got two mandolins — Will Slade plays second, you know,” said Fred Kaler.

“We’ll make a quartet,” suggested Sam with spirit. “Hey, Jack — that tramp sketch you and Nat gave us the other night: it’s all right. Borrow some old togs and put it on the programme.”

Within half-an-hour there were as many as twenty of the neighbors in evidence, several young ladies among them. Hiram Hedges was in for a good time all over. He fixed up a little platform in full view of the porch, the headlight and Japanese lanterns flooded the scene, and soon a really creditable programme was begun.

The quartette was a good one, the tramp act elicited unbounded applause. Bob’s conjuring tricks were fairly creditable, and Fred Kaler’s musical specialties pleased everybody.

For two hours the entertainment was enjoyed. The family organ was lifted out on the porch, and “Old Folks At Home,” “’Way Down Upon The Suwanee River” and other popular songs were joined in by all hands. The evening ended in a royal supper in the old farmhouse kitchen.

After the neighbors had gone home the boys were shown up to three big rooms on the second floor. Sam Chalmers pinned a white handkerchief

to a post in the hall as Hedges bade them good night.

"What's that, now?" inquired Hedges with a grin.

"Flag of truce. We'll wait till to-morrow night before we begin operations."

"Go it while you're young, fellers!" chuckled old Hedges. "Eph and I were boys, once. Mebbe we can show you a few tricks ourselves, if you get too frisky."

"Did you ever play tricks?"

"Did we? Well, I rather think so!" snorted the farmer.

"Funny, I never imagined it," said Jack, innocently.

"Humph! Reckon you air foolin', boy!" muttered Hedges.

Jack and Nat found themselves apportioned to a wing room overlooking the roof of a carriage shed. Jack was tired enough to drop to sleep on the moment. Nat paced about in a sort of uneasy way.

"Going to stay up all night?" asked Jack, gazing at him curiously.

"No, but I want to tell you something, now we're alone. I didn't want to spoil the fun by doing it before."

"Hey?" challenged Jack, receiving his chum's seriousness in some surprise.

“You see, Smith didn’t come along after us,” said Nat.

“That’s so. We’ve been so lively I almost forgot him. Probably he will be on hand first thing in the morning.”

“That’s as may be,” said Nat. “Well, along of him, Jack, I have made a very mysterious and startling discovery. That’s what I have been waiting to tell you about.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MYSTERIOUS RING

"WHY, Nat," said Jack, "you look dreadfully serious as you say that."

"It's bothered me ever since we left the Academy," answered Nat. "You see, Smith talking so mysteriously about his appointment to meet some one who had written him a note, and his not coming back, looked strange. He was the most delighted of any of us to come on the farm junket."

"That's true, Nat."

"If he'd got home at any reasonable hour after we left, you bet he would have footed it after us."

"Allowing all that, what are you driving at, Nat?"

"Why, just this. You know you sent me to look for Smith? I went to his room. He wasn't there. But that room looked queer."

"How queer?" asked Jack.

"All topsy-turvy. His trunk was open, and everything in it rumaged helter-skelter. Then, what was more, there was his suit case. You

know he had that packed with all his curiosities."

"I remember," nodded Jack. "Mighty rare and interesting they were, too."

"Well, everything in the case was dumped on the floor — birch bark pictures, arrow heads, spear points, scalping knives and tomahawks. I couldn't understand it. I didn't try to, when my eye caught the glint of something that seemed to have rolled under a radiator. I fished it out,"

"What was it?" inquired Jack.

"You remember that ring the burglar stole at Denton, at the town jewelry store?"

"Guess I do," assented Jack. "Aunt Angelina made enough fuss about it."

"As you told me then. You know you once showed it to me lying on a cushion in her room, you said you were sure it was some prized relic of your father's."

"My aunt told me so, many a time."

"Any one seeing that ring wouldn't be likely to forget it — it was so queer. It had a big moss agate with the outline of a pine tree on it, and lots of little emeralds and rubies set around its center."

"It was queer, Nat — I don't know its history, but I do not believe there is another ring in the world precisely like it"

"Well, there is."

"Oh —"

"And there it is."

Nat fished a ring from his pocket. He extended it to his comrade, who started as he caught sight of it, and stared at it wonderingly as he held it up to the light.

"Well, well!" said Jack Ranger, slowly.

He might well be astonished. He was bewildered. The ring was an exact counterpart of the one his aunts so prized. The moss agate with the pine tree tracing, the little jewel settings, were the same. The size, the material were identical. For a minute Jack was tempted to believe that it was the stolen ring.

"No, it is not," he said, answering aloud his mental question.

"It's not what?" asked Nat.

"The stolen ring."

"Oh, the one at Denton? Certainly not. How could it be — what would John Smith be doing with that ring?"

"What is he doing with this one?" broke out Jack in excitement. "That's the vital question."

"I'm stumped. You tell."

"It's got some lettering on the inside — yes, here it is: 'O. T. to A. S.' Say, Nat — queerer than ever. The ring at home had 'O. T. to R. R.' on it. Those last were my father's initials — Robert Ranger, just as A. S. probably stand for Alexander Smith, John's father."

Nat's eyes glowed with interest, and he uttered a low but intense whistle of wonder.

"Don't speak to me for a bit," directed Jack, sitting down in a spell-bound way, "I want to think about this."

Jack's brow corrugated, he stared at the ring, he cogitated, he looked bothered.

"I'll have to give it up," he said at length. "If there wasn't some great big mystery about my father ever since I can remember, I wouldn't mind. There is, and I've often thought I'd solve it some day. Judging from the awful spell Aunt Angelina had when that ring was stolen at Denton, I know it is an important relic. Then, too, she fainted away when I described the burglar who stole it. Why can't they throw some light on the affair?" demanded Jack irritably. "It's not fair to keep a fellow in the dark, this way."

"It's simple — one end of it," suggested Nat.

"Which end?"

"John Smith's. When you see him again, just find out where he got his ring, and who 'O. T.' may be."

"Yes," murmured Jack, "and I'll keep an eye out the rest of my life for that burglar. I'll gather up some facts. Then I'll land down on home territory, and make Aunt Angelina tell why there is so much secrecy as to my father. I believe my mother is dead. I can't remember her

at all. About my father, though, I have always had an idea he was alive, but for some reason was leading a life of seclusion. When I am twenty-one, Aunt Angelina says, I come into quite a little money. I suppose then Judge Bennett will explain all this mystery. I shall not wait.

"What will you do?" asked Nat.

"Find out for myself long before then, see if I don't," retorted Jack with spirit and determination.

Jack put the ring carefully away in an inside pocket of his vest. Then boy-like he shrugged his shoulders, dove into bed, and forgot all about the incident for the time being.

At three o'clock in the morning every student guest jumped from the bed and ran to the windows. A frightful trumpet blast had echoed out. Standing in the yard near the house was Hiram Hedges, a great cow horn in his hand.

"Hi, there!" sang down Sam Chalmers. "What you waking people up for at this unearthly hour?"

"Why," grinned back Hedges, "that's our usual custom — calling the cows."

"Oh."

The seven guests went back to bed. At four o'clock there was another wild upheaval. A bell rang out, jangling and crashing on the still air in a hideous clangor.

Jack bounded to the window. Hedges was pulling the rope of a big bell swung between the house and the stables.

"Is it fire?" demanded Nat, peering down.

"Just waking up the hired help," explained Hedges placidly, chuckling up at the row of heads at the upper windows. "Usual farm custom — see?"

The students had scarcely got quieted down to sleep again when bang, bang-bangetty-bang — the row of doors in turn were battered on with some dreadful mallet or club that made the panels fairly sliver and crack.

"Wake up!" roared Hedges — "no sluggards here. Don't miss the meal. Rural custom, you know."

"What is it — midnight lunch?" demanded Sam tartly.

"No, sir, breakfast. Up with you! I promised Dr. Mead to give you the real thing — object lesson on farm life — see? Take warning: Five minutes to dress and get down to the kitchen, or we'll freshen you up with a bucket of well water."

"You old tyrant," shouted Jack — "don't forget it's our turn to-night."

"All right," chuckled Hedges. "You'll find me and Eph ready, I can tell you that."

Such a breakfast seven healthy, hungry boys never devoured before.

"Usually we make corn meal muffins," explained Hedges. "That's when we have civilized guests, though, and want to be polite. Baked it wholesale this time, to meet the demand. My aspirations is for society, but I run no risks with boys. Bring on another slab, Sairey."

There was honey, apple sauce, jam, fried bacon sweet as sugar and eggs deliciously fresh. Cream was in great demand, and the boys were served with an unlimited supply. Late radishes and lettuce were set at every plate. Cold chicken and home-made bread garnished the feast, and the gay party left the table feeling strong and hearty for a rare day of fun and frolic.

Hedges made a feint at real farm work just to draw the boys into all kinds of scrapes. Bob Movel wanted to plow, a team was rigged out and ran away and pulled him through a dozen mud puddles. Fred Kaler played some stirring notes on the horn as they were crossing a meadow. This aroused a great bull, and in escaping over a fence Fred lost a part of his outing coat. Will Slade's attention was gravely directed by Uncle Eph to some "cuckoos' nests." He investigated these, and there was a wild hornet race. By noon all hands were ready to enjoy a dinner that lingered in their

memories for years as "the most famous feed of their lives."

"Now then," announced Hedges, after the meal, "Eph and I have some real Saturday afternoon chores to do. I'm going to trust you with the light wagon and old Dobbin. You can run down to Brocton, pick up what fun you can, and bring home the mail. There's only one caution: Dobbin is particular of his company, and sometimes stubborn. Don't try and urge him. Coaxing does it."

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" rang out a gay chorus, as the old wagon clattered away ten minutes later. Fred Kaler's horn made the welkin ring, while his comrades feasted on three different varieties of apples.

"Boys, we ought to have a dandy time in town!"

"Say, we won't do a thing to the sleepy old place!"

"That's right, but we must beware, or else —"

"The town constable will be after us," finished another. "Oh, we won't do anything as desperate as all that."

Away they went up the road and down, singing their school songs, and "cutting up" generally. More than once a cap or hat went sailing to the ground and they had to stop to pick it up. When

they passed a farmhouse the folks would rush forth to see what was the matter.

"Lot o' crazy schoolboys!" cried one old farmer. "Hi!" he shouted, "don't ye stop here, or I'll git my shot-gun."

"Hi, mister there's a fire in your house!" called out Nat.

"A fire?" gasped the man.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the stove, I guess,— by the smoke coming out of your chimney," answered Nat.

And then with a laugh the boys went on, leaving the farmer shaking his fist at them.

CHAPTER XXIX

SAM CHALMERS' SCHEME

JACK RANGER and his friends arrived in town about one o'clock. A little tent show was in progress, and most of the crowd wanted to attend it. The party split up. Jack wanted to look up one or two matters on his mind, and Nat and Sam insisted on joining him.

Jack called on the Lanes. Little Bessie was overjoyed to welcome him. Her grandmother received him with a tearful gratitude and affection that made the trio the better for the visit.

"I hope we find Smith at the farm when we go back," remarked Sam. "Wonder what kept him away?"

"Oh, he may be along," said Jack, with affected carelessness, though he felt worried and uneasy at heart. In fact, he had about decided to go to the Academy early in the morning if Smith did not show up by that time.

"Tell you, fellows," he said, as they walked along: "I once promised myself to come back to this town and look up a certain man."

"Who is it?" inquired Nat.

"A fellow named Lee."

"Eh? Oh, yes," nodded Nat. "He's the fellow who played that mean trick on Mrs. Lane about her cow, Mooly?"

"That's right," said Jack. "I'll stay up all night to pay him off for that bit of meanness. I think Hiram Hedges would walk ten miles to second the motion."

"Can't we rig up some score on the old curmudgeon?" suggested Sam, ready for any excitement at all times.

"I wish we could hit his pocket some way, good and hard," replied Jack. "That's all that ever reaches his brood of sharks. Wait a minute. We'll inquire and locate him. That may suggest some scheme for making it lively for him."

Jack left the road and walked up to the porch of a dilapidated little house. A poorly-dressed, sullen-faced man was lounging on the steps. He was looking down dejectedly.

"My friend," spoke Jack, "can you tell me where a man named Lee lives?"

The person addressed looked up with a queer, quick flash in his eye. He harshly muttered something to himself, but only said audibly.

"Yes — next house."

"Oh, neighbors, are you?" observed Jack, studying the man curiously.

"Neighbors?" suddenly snarled the man.

"Oh, yes, truly brotherly friends, we are! Say, don't hang around here if you don't want your ears shocked with what a little-cornered fish thinks of a big blood-thirsty shark — that's him."

"I've heard about him," said Jack. "Makes lots of trouble for people, doesn't he?"

"No, he waits till people get into trouble. Then he flops in as the gentle consoler," snapped the man. "That's Lee. He isn't human, youngster. He's a bloodsucker, a ghoul. You see my little place here? Well, I had a bad spell of luck. I've got in debt, head over heels. How Lee finds it all out I don't know, but he does. For a week he's been hanging around here. Telling how sorry he is. Telling how it's only a question of time when I've got to go under. I had a loan arranged. He steered off the party. Fixed up an extension of some notes. He bought them up. Now I'm in a hole. He offers me three hundred dollars to turn the place over to him. It's worth eight hundred. For all that, desperate as I am, much as I hate him, I've no doubt he'll watch and wait, and tire me out and get it."

Nat and Sam had approached while this bit of conversation was going on. The latter looked very interested.

"Don't you do it, mister," he suddenly broke out.

" 'Spose I've got to? "

" You haven't. Say, come here for a minute, will you? I want to tell you something particular."

The man looked puzzled, then suspicious. Then he sighed as if nothing mattered much. He joined Sam at a little distance, out of earshot of Jack and Nat.

" What's Sam up to, anyhow? " asked Nat.

" Of course on the trail of that man, Lee," answered Jack.

" And he's throwing his soul into the business, judging from the way he's laying it down to the owner of this place," suggested Nat.

An animated colloquy went on between the two at a distance. The owner of the place seemed greatly interested. Then he acted excited. He perked up visibly. Once or twice he laughed outright. Sam button-holed him, persuaded him. To the surprise of the watchers, the man abruptly walked off in the direction of Lee's house. Then Sam rejoined his waiting friends.

His face was all aglow. He was rubbing his hands together gleefully. He tripped along spry and chipper.

" Fixed, fellows," he announced.

" What's fixed? " demanded Jack dubiously.

" Lee. This man here, Dodge, has agreed.

It's all left to me. There's a dollar," and Sam brought out the silver coin in question. "Will you each contribute the same to see that shark, Lee, get his desserts?"

"There's the coin," announced Nat promptly, while Jack produced a dollar bill.

"Now, then, I'm going to the village," reported Sam. "I'll be back inside of half-an-hour. You two simply stay seated on those steps. Dodge won't come back, but very likely Lee will soon put in an appearance. When he does he'll begin to pump you. Don't pump. Be absolutely non-committal. Say you're waiting orders. Understand: strictly non-committal-a-waiting-or-ders."

"Hold on, there," challenged Jack, as Sam started away. "What's the essence of this game, anyhow?"

"Never you mind. You'll learn later. I've got a scheme. I'll take the responsibility."

"I don't want to help in any deception," began Jack.

"Who asked you to?" demanded Sam with lofty dignity. "Shut up. Do as I say. A-waiting or-ders. I'm off."

"Crazy," observed Nat, as their excitable comrade disappeared.

"Or clever," added Jack.

Perhaps fifteen minutes passed by without any

developments. Then both became curious and expectant as they saw a man leave the place indicated to them as belonging to Lee.

"Our man," said Jack, as the fellow approached them.

"Oh, sure," nodded Nat — "that hook nose and mean smirk betray him."

"Hum — ha! Something going on here, young gentlemen?" hailed the newcomer, in oily tones.

"Nothing that I see out of the ordinary," responded Jack tersely.

"Come from the city, I 'spose."

"We don't live here, if that is what you mean," said Nat.

"I see — knew that. I'll venture you're here on business now?"

"You keep on guessing," advised Nat, deliberately turning his back on the questioner.

The latter looked sourly at the boys and walked casually about the place. They lost sight of him finally.

"There's Sam," said Nat a little later, and both he and his companion stared hard at their approaching friend.

Sam carried a dozen or more steel rods in one hand, such as are ordinarily used in fastening down tent flaps. In his other hand he had a great ball of heavy fish line. With Sam was a keen-eyed

man of about thirty. He reminded Jack of the average showman or ticket seller.

"Mr. Mayberry, my chums," introduced Sam. "Here, Jack, you take these stakes. Stick them in the ground here and there, and pretend to be measuring off the ground. Make a great ado about distances — feet, rods and yards."

"Sort of surveying — see?" smiled the manager, with a wink.

That individual strutted about in a sort of speculative way, studying the Dodge place in detail. Sam unrolled two big blank sheets of paper.

"Don't know what you are up to," muttered Nat, "but here goes — thirty feet."

"Louder!" ordered Sam, and then as he noticed Lee turn a corner of the place in a hurry he made a great show of taking down the measurements. Lee positively almost ran him down in his haste.

"Say, you ain't surveying here, are you?" he questioned.

"Got eyes, haven't you?" demanded Sam.

"But — oh, is that the boss?" said Lee, discovering the stranger for the first time. "Hi, there, mister."

"Want me?" coolly interrogated Mayberry.

"Wanted to know, you know. This is the Dodge place. I'm his neighbor. Interested in this place — he owes me money."

"I don't see how that interests me," remarked Mayberry indifferently.

"But what's he up to — or rather what are you up to? Measuring up the place? I can tell you all about it. It's five and a-quarter acres."

"Yes, and about as fine a site for a sanitarium as a man could wish to see," observed Mayberry in an approving tone.

"Eh? Why, I see. You're looking out to buy a place to build on — is that it?" asked Lee eagerly. "Mister, I've got a six acre lot down the road."

"You haven't got any such trees as that little grove yonder, though. You don't stand on such a rise as this."

"I can sell down yonder for two hundred dollars an acre," persisted Lee.

"I'd rather have this at three hundred," observed Mayberry.

"You'd give three hundred dollars an acre for this?" cried Lee, his little weasel eyes glittering.

"I didn't say so, did I? Don't bother me, my man. Personally, I couldn't buy a picket in that fence yonder."

"No, but your principal could. He! he! I understand. Three hundred dollars an acre? Why —" and Lee bolted off towards Brocton.

"The medicine works," exclaimed Sam Chal-

mers with a vast grin. "Here's your two dollars, Mr. Mayberry. The show's over. Will you carry back the circus stakes? Thanks. You won't mention this business?"

"Not I. From what you tell me, that old skinflint deserves to buy a gold brick. Good day, gentlemen."

Mayberry tipped his hat airily to the trio, put the money given him in his pocket, and walked leisurely back to town.

"And now, Sam Chalmers — what?" challenged Jack, as soon as the man's back was turned.

"Only this, replied Sam, with dancing eyes: "Mayberry is with the show here, and I bought an hour of his spare time. As Lee goes townwards, he'll hear that there are rumors of a big offer for the Dodge place. He will hunt up Dodge, who will play him like a fish on a taut line."

"See here, Sam, this is a pretty dubious proceeding," began Jack.

"All right. I'm responsible for it. If it teaches Lee how nice it is to be hocused after he has spent his life in hocussing others, I'll be proud of my share in it."

At five o'clock the wagon stood near the show grounds, ready for the homeward trip. All were soon aboard except Sam. They moved down the

main street slowly, looking for him. Finally he came running down a side street and climbed into the wagon, out of breath.

"It's all right," he panted. "Lee found Dodge. He would buy the property. He got it. eight hundred — cash."

"And when he finds out —"

"He has found out," answered Sam, "and has frantically consulted two lawyers in turn. They laughed at him, saying he only paid a fair price for the land. Some one hooted 'Mooly!' at him, some one else gave a hint that they'd throw in a coat of tar and feathers if he said much, and he's sneaked home, a wiser and a poorer man."

Old Dobbin took his time on the road home. He let several wagons pass him. This did not suit the boys.

"What a slow poke of a nag!"

"Somebody get out and pull him with a rope!"

"Coax him with a carrot, Nat!"

"Offer him some clover."

"Tell him he is going home to dine on oats."

"Say, this is fierce! We are taking everybody's dust!"

"And I am half choked."

"So am I."

Bob Movel dropped from the wagon and got a switch. Before Jack learned what he was

about, he climbed over the seat and gave the horse a sharp clip.

"Hold on!" warned Jack — "too late."

"Whoop!" yelled a chorus of voices.

Old Dobbin had stopped. With a violent kick of both hind feet he sent the seat whirling backwards into the wagon. Then he stood motionless and stubborn as a mule, his feet planted firmly in the road as if minded to stay there for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER XXX

A MIDNIGHT ALARM

"PIGS and pumpkins!" shouted Nat Anderson.

"You've done it now," declared Jack to Bob.

"Well, got tired moseying along at a snail's pace," muttered Bob. "That old bag of bones let everything on the road pass us by."

"That old bag of bones, as you call him," said Nat, "appears to have a mind of his own. Considering what Uncle Hi told us, I reckon we'll about carry that animal home, if we expect to get there to-night."

They righted things from the spill. Then Jack went in front of the horse. Old Dobbin had planted his four feet like stiff sticks of wood. He flopped one ear and then the other in a wag-gish sort of a way. He shook his head, as Jack tried to pet him, with a blink of mild obstinacy in his eye.

Jack exhausted his powers of coaxing. Finally Will Slade came forward with what was left of a paper of sugar plums. Jack offered one to the horse. Dobbin accepted it promptly. In fact

he accommodately devoured all they gave him. When, however, they held some at a distance from his nose, thus trying to lure him to start up, he declined to follow the snare.

As the last one was given him, Will Slade threw away the empty bag, Dobbin gave a lazy snort and gracefully sank flat on the ground between the shafts.

"Oh, say, now!" cried Kaler in dismay.

"Maybe he's sick?" suggested Bob, after a pause.

"He wasn't sick till you hit him with that switch," reminded Sam.

They spent ten minutes exercising all their ingenuity to get Dobbin to arise. He lolled back in an easy, satisfied attitude, and refused to budge.

"What are you going to do?" inquired Nat desperately of Jack.

"Well it's over two miles to the farm. I think Mr. Hedges figured on just this climax, purposely. We can't go back with the joke on us. Come, fellows, we've got to rouse that animal some way to a sense of his duty."

"S-s-say," broke out Will Slade animatedly, "t-t-the v-v-very th-th-thing."

"What is?" challenged Jack—"don't take all night telling it."

"G-g-got to t-t-take t-t-time."

"Show us, instead."

"F-f-fence r-r-rail. S-s-saw 'em t-t-try it on ox-ox-oxen."

"I see," nodded Sam. "Read of that. Come on, fellows. Pile a lot of fence rails across the horse's back. He'll get up when the load becomes too heavy."

"Pzznt! T-t-told you so!" chuckled Will in triumph, as after about ten fence rails had been piled across Dobbin the animal condescended to arise, thrusting the rails aside. This did not mean progress, however. Dobbin simply remained stationary in another pose.

Bob Movel had drifted off by himself during the past few minutes. He now reappeared.

"Say, fellows," he said, "I noticed some men with a wagon, camping over in the woods back there."

"What of it?" asked Sam.

"Thought they might help us. Say, you bet there's some mystery about them. As I got near them they jumped up from the grass, rolled somebody or something all tied up with ropes into a blanket, and hoisted it into a weird-looking covered wagon, all boxed in. Then they ran at me with clubs, yelling 'Get out of here,' get out of here, do you hear?"

"Bah! Been reading too many blood-and-thunder five-cent libraries, Movel," commented Sam.

"There's a deep mystery there, you mind me," insisted Bob darkly.

"Well we've got our own troubles just now," asserted Sam, looking hopelessly at old Dobbin.

"Pzznt. G-g-got an-an-another s-s-scheme," proclaimed Will.

"Out with it, Sladesy," urged Bob Movel.

"B-b-build a f-f-fire un-un-under him."

"Heard of that, too," seconded Sam, approvingly. "Yes, that will move him up."

"Careful, fellows," warned Jack. "We don't want to do any damage."

"We'll just warm him up a bit," promised Nat, gathering some dry brush from the side of the road.

Dobbin pricked up his ears at the rustling under him and the striking of a match. Nat just grazed contact with a hind foot, which shot out suddenly as the little pile blazed up.

"T-t-told you s-s-so!" again piped Will.

"But he's stopped again. The mischief," yelled Nat. "Kick the fire! kick it out, or you'll have the whole wagon ablaze."

Dobbin uttered a deep snort. The wise old horse seemed actually laughing at them. It appeared as if he had calculated to an inch to move on and leave the burning brush directly under the vehicle.

Then the horse kicked up his heels, and with a

whirl and a whiz he put down the road. In amazement the boys stared after him.

"Why, what a spurt!" cried Sam. "A racer couldn't beat that. Changed his mind. Hustle after him, fellows, and get aboard. I guess he's minded to take us home at last."

"Is he? Not!" panted Bob Movel in disgust.

Dobbin had played them a new trick. He had run like the wind about three hundred yards. Halting, he grazed on some grass alongside the road.

The minute the crowd neared the wagon, however, he made another spurt. Four times the animal kept up these tactics. Fast as Jack and the others ran, he did not allow them to quite come up with him. After the last halt Dobbin made a final dash. From a distance the boys saw him turn into the farmyard. A ringing "Haw! haw!" from Hiram Hedges greeted them as they lagged after, looking pretty sheepish.

Hedges, however, did not dwell on the incident to the discomfiture of his guests. When he and Uncle Eph were told of Sam Chalmers' efforts on behalf of Lee's victim back at Brocton they danced a double jig of satisfaction and delight.

"No Smith, I see," observed Nat to Jack, as they went in to supper, "and it's pretty singular

he don't come. Thought anything more about that ring, Jack?"

"No, it's no use till I get more facts. I'm going to, though. In the morning I shall ask Mr. Hedges to let me have a rig. I shall drive over to the Academy and see Smith."

"Yes — if he's there," suggested Nat.

"Oh, I think he will be. Why wouldn't he be?" inquired Jack.

Nat did not venture to express any theory on this point. Jack felt unsettled and uneasy about Smith. However, he dismissed him from his mind amid the jolly time they had at the supper table. Here a "Doughnut Contest" began the minute Mrs. Tibbs brought on two great bowls, piled high with her delicious pastry fresh and hot from the kitchen range.

The boys had counted on playing some tricks on their genial hosts that evening. They were somewhat tired out, however. Uncle Hi looked bright and sprightly, and so did Uncle Eph. They cut up like two overgrown school-boys, and all the time suggested by their manner that they were quite on the alert to meet any games attempted by their young guests.

The hired men got pitching quoits about six o'clock. The boys joined them. This led to some interesting wrestling bouts, and then to some

athletic feats on the swing ropes. When dark came all hands were glad to adjourn to the big roomy kitchen of the farm house. They there ate apples, cracked hickory nuts, and popped corn, listening to some old time stories well told by the two farmers.

Uncle Eph bade them good night about ten o'clock. Uncle Hi had left them a quarter-of-an-hour previous. The boys sat down on the big broad porch for a good night chat.

Finally Bob Movel, Will Slade and Fred Kaler left their companions. The others did not join them, but kept track of them. Bob and his party watched the window of a lighted room at the rear end of the house.

Up there Uncle Eph was ostentatiously retiring for the night. They could see him plainly removing his vest and collar. He threshed about for a while. The light went out.

"He's left the window open," whispered Bob to Will and Fred. "He's got into bed. Now's the time."

The three sped away to the stables. Soon they returned carrying a bag. Inside of it there was a confused stirring about and mewing.

Getting under the open window they had been watching, they attached the bag to a long pole. They lifted this with its burden carefully, poked

it over the window sill, and dropped the bag inside of the room.

There was a series of cat cries. The boys chuckled.

"Wonder how Uncle Eph will like his bed fellows?" crowed Bob Movel, thinking it all a capital, clever trick.

"Why, say —" began Fred, and stopped suddenly.

At another window, quite some distance away, a light appeared. Grinning serenely, Uncle Eph approached it.

"Hey, you down there," he sang out, "what you fellows putting in the old store room? Good night!" and he stoutly closed the shutters and retired.

"Sold!" muttered Bob in disgust.

"Never slept in that room at all," said Fred.

Jack and his companions gave them the laugh as they stepped into the moonlight from the shadow of some bushes where they had been watching them.

"I think we'll call it a half-day and quit," suggested Jack, after they had hung around the porch for a few minutes.

Just then Will, who had been roaming about at random, came hustling up to the party.

"S-s-say, f-f-fellows," he commenced in a rapt chuckle.

"Spell it out," ordered Jack.

"Un-un-uncle H-H-Hi —"

"What about him?" demanded Nat.

"In th-th-that ha-ha-hammock," gloated Will.

"Never!" aspirated Sam in a fervor of hope.

"S-st. Hist — also, back!"

Sam glided across the garden to a spot where a high-strung hammock was outlined in the silvery moonlight. He sneaked about its vicinity. He came back to the others with his face aglow with radiant smiles.

"It's Uncle Hi right enough," he said. "He's strung the hammock up away from danger. Fast asleep. Sad — sad. Fellows, a rush, the Academy war cry, and a boosting swing that will send him kiting. Then cut the ropes, double him up in the netting, and tie him up on the barn roof."

"M-m!" muttered Nat, "life is indeed worth living."

"Line up," ordered Jack impressively.

They ranged in due order. Then noiselessly they sped over the dewy lawn. Aimed straight for the full, clean sweep between two trees, their hands in unison struck the hammock in which lay a familiar figure.

"Boost!"

"More, more, who wants more? No more, some more, Rudmore! Rudmore! Ball, ball! Washington Hall!"

They hoisted the hammock on a dizzy whirl, running under it, turned, and started to jump to the end ropes and cut them asunder.

"I say!" bolted out Sam.

"He's tumbled out," muttered Nat.

For a moment their wild mirth was checked. On the rebound the figure in the hammock had tumbled out and lay motionless on the ground.

"I hope we weren't too sudden," began Jack seriously.

"He's stunned," announced Fred Kaler.

They started to approach the silent form with some direful misgivings at mind.

"Hi, down there," fell on their ears like an electric shock. "More, more, who wants more? Sold again, but don't get sore! Good night, youngsters," and old Hiram Hedges waved his hand airily from an upper window of the house towards the dummy at the feet of his young guests from Washington Hall.

CHAPTER XXXI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

JACK RANGER and his friends went to bed good-naturedly. As they passed the door of Uncle Eph's room he seemed to be laughing in his sleep. Uncle Hi gave several farm-made variations on the Academy campus cry. Finally all hands got to sleep.

Jack was awakened about an hour later by a creaking sound in front of the house. Chains rattled, harness jangled. Several voices mingled together.

He went to the side window and leaned out to listen. Just then, armed with a lantern, Uncle Eph passed from the direction of the stables, carrying a whiffletree.

"Anything the matter, Mr. Tibbs?" called down Jack.

"Eh? Oh, it's you, Ranger? Still awake? Why, no, son. Some fellows with a wagon broke down in a rut out in the road and smashed a wheel. They want to get their wagon and themselves to shelter. Have to send to Brocton for a new wheel in the morning."

"Can I be of any help?" asked Jack.

"None at all, thankee. It's a light covered wagon, and we can drag it into the carriage shed here. One of the men will sleep in the hayloft. The other we can give a spare bed to."

Mr. Tibbs passed on his way. Jack got back into bed. He drifted into dreamland again, wondering if this was not the "mysterious wagon" Bob Movel had seen in the woods, and catching sounds of its removal to the carriage shed.

It must have been less than an hour afterwards, Jack calculated, when he was most rudely awakened again. There was a vivid echo in his ears of a scream, a cry. Somebody was sitting bolt upright in bed beside him and was clutching his arm convulsively. It was Nat.

"Jack!" gasped his companion—"did you hear that?"

"A yell—a shout. What was it? Some of the fellows on the rampage."

"No," insisted Nat. "Jack, get up. I tell you this means something. I heard the cry distinctly. Jack, sure as we two are here this minute, it was uttered by John Smith—or his ghost."

"Nat, nonsense!" cried Jack sharply, but he too was sitting upright by this time.

"Jack," went on Nat, "I'll eat my hat if that yell wasn't precisely the same as the one John

Smith gave us on Sunset Island, the day Matt Deane was poking fun at him."

"I think it must have been some of the fellows imitating the cry," said Jack.

"Humph, not much," said Nat. "They can't do it — no more than Matt's stage imitation resembled it. No use talking. I say again this was the real thing — John Smith, or his ghost."

Jack got up and slipped on his clothes. Nat followed his example. He got to the window first and glanced out.

"Jack," he said quickly, "come here."

"What is it, Nat?"

"There — the carriage shed."

This structure was less than ten feet away from the house. It was an ordinary affair, and had grown ramshackly from usage. As they gazed down at it now, light showed through the broad spaces between the loose roof boards.

Jack peered sharply and with growing interest. He could see a man moving about quickly inside the shed. He had just put a lighted lantern on the floor.

There was a covered light wagon in the shed. One wheel was gone, and the axle was propped up on a jack. The man was rushing at a door at the back of the wagon. He pulled this open, it worked on hinges. Then he made a leap.

Vague, confused cries reached the ears of the

two astonished watchers. They saw the man come out of the wagon shortly. He had a phial in one hand which he threw on the ground. He reclosed the wagon back, puffing and panting as if he had just had a struggle with some one. He stood looking at the wagon in silence for some minutes. Then he put out the lantern, came out into the open air, closed the shed doors, and went over towards the stables.

"Did you ever!" instantly ejaculated Nat.

"This is startling," said Jack. "Look here, put on your shoes. There is some mystery down yonder — I'm going to explore it."

"Count me in, I'm getting mightily interested," declared Nat, and inside of five minutes they were noiselessly down the stairs and out on the front porch.

Jack was sure from what he had seen that the wagon in the carriage shed was the vehicle that had broken down in front of the house earlier in the night. He decided it must also be the wagon discovered in the timber by Bob Movel.

Mr. Tibbs had said that one of the two men with this wagon was to sleep in the house, the other in the hayloft. It was this latter, Jack now knew, whom he had just been watching. The man had apparently just gone back to his bed in the stables.

"Come on," said Jack to Nat, his mind filled

with many strange theories. "I'm going to investigate that carriage shed right away."

The door of the shed had a hasp secured by a piece of wood. As they opened the door Jack started back.

"Whew!" he sniffed — "chloroform."

"That's what it is," declared Nat. "My foot just kicked a bottle. Here it is. Light a match."

His companion did so. The phail had a printed label on it reading, "Chloroform."

"It makes my head dizzy. The air is full of it," said Jack. "Here, Nat, keep a match lit till I look inside of that wagon. Something is mighty queer here, and Bob Movel wasn't so far out of the way when he told us this afternoon about this same layout back in the woods."

Nat took the dozen or more matches tendered by Jack and lighted one, prepared to ignite the others in turn as needed. After some tugging at a catch on the back of the wagon Jack managed to open its door. He staggered back as he did so. The air was impregnated with strong fumes of the chloroform. Then both peered into the wagon.

"There's some one!" cried Nat, greatly excited.

A form lay tied hand and foot on an old mattress lying on the bottom of the wagon, and



"IT'S JOHN SMITH!"—Page 269.

partially covered by a buggy robe. Jack got up into the wagon box.

"It's a boy," he said in a husky tone of voice. "Hand me a match. Nat, it's John Smith!"

Jack was fairly overcome at the discovery. Nat gasped out his wonderment in quick, short breaths.

"Those villains!" cried Jack. "Quick, Nat, help me lift him out. Easy, now. That's it. No, don't drop him here. Get him into the open air. Oh, dear — how has this all come about?"

There was an old bench alongside the carriage shed. They placed John Smith on this. Nat stood in awed silence looking down at him. Jack with trembling fingers took out his pocket knife, and cut the ropes that secured his hands and feet.

"Jack," whispered Nat hoarsely, "he doesn't move. He isn't — isn't dead, is he?"

"He is breathing," answered Jack in a strained tone. "Oh, dear — how bad he looks. Those villains. Oh!"

Jack uttered a ringing shout. He had chanced to look up at the house. Just then a human face peered down from an upper window.

"The other man!" cried Jack. "Why, Nat, did you see him? Do you know who he is?"

"No."

"The man who stole my aunt's ring from the jewelry store — the burglar at Denton. I said I should never forget his face. I haven't, Nat.

Arouse the house. As for me — I'm after that man."

Nat began a vivid outcry. His tones filled the still midnight air with ringing echoes.

Jack ran around to the front of the house. He dashed up the steps. Just crossing the porch he heard some one coming down the inside stairs, four at a time.

"It's him," panted Jack. "He saw me. He has taken the alarm. Mr. Hedges! Mr. Tibbs!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Wake up. A burglar is in the house! Burglars! burglars! burglars!"

CHAPTER XXXII

GETTING "WARM"

JACK RANGER made a great outcry. The house was instantly aroused. He could hear rapid trampling on the upper floor. Windows were raised, heads stuck out, and many excited demands made as to the source of the commotion.

The man coming down the stairs Jack felt sure was the man he had just seen at an upper window.

"I've got to stop him," declared Jack, and grabbed for one of the porch chairs, to seize it, reverse it and use it as a weapon the minute the man showed his face beyond the open front door.

A mishap occurred, however. The chair slipped from Jack's hand and went sliding across the porch. It fell over flat. At that very moment the fugitive leaped across the threshold.

"Destruction!" he bawled, struck the chair, tumbled over it, and, smashing off two of its legs, went sprawling head-first down the steps.

Jack recognized the fellow at once,—beyond the vestige of a doubt, this time. He was the burglar who had robbed the jewelry store at Denton. He had possession of the ring Aunt

Angelina so prized. Jack guessed that the secret of John Smith's plight was the burglar's effort, for some mysterious reason, to also get possession of his ring. Jack wanted back the stolen ring. He was resolved to check this audacious criminal. He might find out lots of things about the mystery of his young life by doing so.

"Get a club — anything, Nat," he shouted, as his chum rounded the corner of the house. Then Jack dove at the sprawling heels of the flying burglar.

The fellow was massed in a crouched-up heap at the bottom of the steps. He now made out Jack clearly, and as he squirmed to regain his footing he uttered a great shout of amazement.

"Yes, it's me," said Jack. "I told you back at Denton I'd remember your face."

"Let go, or I'll —"

"Bah! Hit him, Nat."

Jack had grabbed one of the gyrating feet of the prostrate burglar. Nat was advancing with a wagon stake he had come across lying around loose. The burglar kicked out his free foot. In hurrying from his room he seemed to have grabbed up a small strap satchel. This he had retained hold of, and giving it a swing by the long strap, he directed a wicked blow at Jack's head.

Snap! went the strap, and the whole affair swung free from the man's hand, grazed Jack's

cheek as the latter dodged, and, striking one of the panes of glass in the narrow sash siding of the door, crashed its way into the hall. With a prodigious effort the burglar jerked loose his imprisoned limb.

In an instant he was on his feet. He ducked deftly, escaped the descent of the wagon stake in Nat's hand, and with a vicious snarl of baffled rage and disappointment flew around the side of the house.

They heard his voice shouting out what seemed to be some signal of alarm to his accomplice in the hayloft. Jack, about to put after him, halted for an instant, for Hiram Hedges, followed by Uncle Eph, both clad in picturesque flannelette night gowns, came bounding into view.

"Hey, what's up?" gasped Hedges.

"Bet a cookie it's a trick," panted Uncle Eph.

"Don't wait, don't delay," cried Jack. "It is really a burglar. Those two men who came here to-night—they are desperate criminals. Stop them! corner them!"

"Where are they?"

"This way," ordered Nat, making for the stables.

Jack ran at the alarm bell rope and pulled it vigorously. Within two minutes the aroused hired men and nearly all the students came trooping into view.

Jack had time to only briefly explain the situation. Then all hands scattered for the pursuit. Jack and Nat went to where John Smith lay unconscious.

"He's pretty dead gone when all this hubbub don't reach him," said Nat.

Jack failed to arouse Smith. He satisfied himself, however, that the Indian boy's heart was beating, he chafed his wrists and temples. One by one the midnight pursuers came trooping back to the spot. Soon there was a bewildered circle about the old bench on which John Smith lay.

Sam and the other boys were amazed as soon as they recognized Smith. They asked a dozen excited questions of Jack. Then Hedges came up.

"Been dreaming, young Ranger," he insinuated.

"What about?" demanded Jack.

"Yes, we hain't found no one," observed Eph suspiciously.

"Go to the carriage shed, hunt for the man in the hay loft, or for the man you took into the house," suggested Jack. "And say — does that look like a dream?"

"Hey! I declare," ejaculated Hedges with a stare. "Why, it's one of your chums."

"Yes," nodded Jack.

"The Injun boy who didn't come?"

"That's who it is," said Jack. "Nat and I discovered him in that box wagon in the carriage shed. He was locked inside the wagon — chloroformed."

"Why," said Uncle Eph, shaking the motionless Smith, "he's in bad shape. Get him into the house. Hiram, call Sairey, quick."

They lifted John Smith carefully and carried him into the front parlor of the farm house, laying him on a lounge. Mrs. Tibbs was soon on the scene. She tried a dozen home-made restoratives. None, however, had any effect on the patient.

"Better send for the doctor, Hiram," suggested Uncle Eph.

This Hedges did. They had a telephone in the house. It did not connect Academy-way, but did with Brocton. A hurry call was made over the phone for the family physician.

The hired men were sent out, armed, in further pursuit of the burglars far and wide. Hedges also notified the police at Brocton, sending a description of the two men.

There was no more sleep for the boys that night. They were excited, and also anxious about Smith. They went up stairs, dressed themselves fully, and then hung around the parlor door and the front of the house.

Two of the hired men came in to report that

they had searched the immediate vicinity of the farm house. The men had not hidden anywhere in its neighborhood so far as they could discover. Others of the farmhands had gone farther afield in the pursuit.

Mrs. Tibbs and the cook sat by the lounge and fanned and nursed Smith, who continued to lay in a dead stupor.

Jack had stumbled over the little strap satchel when they were carrying Smith into the house. After a spell he took it up to their room, Nat accompanying him.

"We'll see how much this memento of the burglar may enlighten us," he said.

The satchel was locked, and Jack broke it open. Inside were several railway time tables, a revolver, some bottles filled with drugs, a false beard, and, in a little tin box, Jack found something that caused him involuntarily to utter a great shout

"What is it?" inquired Nat curiously.

"The ring, the other ring, the one stolen from Aunt Angelina at Denton," said Jack. "Look, Nat, at the two of them together," and he lay side by side the ring Nat had found in Smith's room at Washington Hall, and the one he had just found in the tin box in the satchel.

"Alike as two peas," muttered Nat.

"See," continued Jack holding up the last recovered ring. "Same style of lettering in the in-

scription, only 'O. T. to R. R.' on this one — Robert Ranger, my father."

"Wonder if there's any more like them in the world?" suggested Nat in a musing tone. "That burglar's special mission in life seems to be to hunt them up and get them. Do you suppose he had done that ransacking I noticed in Smith's room at the Academy?"

"It looks so. There's no telling," responded Jack.

"I'm terribly anxious to hear Smith's story."

"Yes, it's bound to throw some light on all this deep mystery," declared Jack.

"How do you guess it?" asked Nat.

"I can't — yet, but I'm doing some tall thinking," observed Jack in an abstracted way.

The village doctor finally arrived, and was shut in with Smith and Hedges for half-an-hour.

"Nothing serious," he reported, as he came out and Jack anxiously importuned him as to the condition of his friend. "He's been badly dosed, and he's been hardly used, too. There is a bad cut behind one ear, and his temple is bruised. I have left some medicine that will counteract the poison given him. It may be some days before that dosed brain of his will be perfectly clear."

Jack glided into the parlor. He experienced a thrill as he observed that Smith's eyes were now

open. The patient looked at Jack as he approached the couch.

"You mustn't disturb him," warned Mrs. Tibbs.

"I won't," said Jack, "only — I'm his best friend, and terribly anxious about him. Smith," he spoke, close to the patient's ear, "don't you know me?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Smith wearily, "tired, tired, good night."

"It's Jack Ranger. Smith, rouse up — only for a minute," urged Jack, though very gently. "See if you can't tell me something. That ring you have — 'O. T. to A. S.' — a ring of your father's. Who is 'O. T.'?"

"I'm tired — oh, yes, 'O. T.?' That's Orion — let me see," murmured Smith drearily — "oh, yes: Orion Tevis."

Jack drew back from the couch now, a satisfied expression on his face. It was just in time to meet the doctor, who said sharply:

"Young man, this won't do at all — positively the patient must have quiet, absolute quiet."

"I promise not to disturb him again, doctor," pledged Jack. "Nat, come here," he said with subdued excitement, as he got outside again, and he led his chum out of earshot of the others. "I'm going back to Brocton with the doctor."

"To-night?"

"Yes, Nat. I must. I can't sleep or rest till I know more about this mysterious affair. You urge up the people here to continue the search for the burglars. I must telegraph the folks at Denton right away. Doctor," continued Jack, approaching the village physician as he came down the steps of the house, "will you give me a lift to town in your gig?"

"Hey?" spoke Hedges, staring hard at Jack for fully half a minute, "what's your idea, youngster?"

"I've got one all right," declared Jack, "and it's important. It's all of a piece of poor Smith's condition and those fellows your men are searching for."

Jack drove back to town with the doctor. When he left the physician he went straight to the little railway depot at Brocton.

He roused up the sleepy telegraph operator there, secured a blank, and stood for a few minutes pondering over it.

"I'm going to find out what my aunts know about that ring and about my father," ruminated Jack. "How had I better do it? I don't want to startle the folks, but I'm bound to force quick action. I have it — Judge Bennett. He is their family lawyer, he knows all they know. Here goes." And Jack wrote out the following message:

"Very important. Wire me at once: Who is Orion Tevis? Must know right away. Will explain later why. Am waiting for answer."

"Send that — rush," spoke Jack, handing the message to the operator along with a ten dollar bill. "Don't spare money. It must be delivered forthwith, and it must be answered at once. Keep the change, if any is left for you."

The operator grinned with pleasure at the liberality suggested. He set the instrument clicking.

"All right," he said. "I've sent it — special. If your man will get up to receive the message, we'll have a reply in thirty minutes."

It was exactly an hour when the operator roused Jack, who sat in an old arm chair near the open door of the little depot.

"She's coming," the man announced.

"Read the clicks," suggested Jack — "I'm anxious."

"All right: 'Jack Ran-ger: Come — home — first — train — Mon-day — morn-ing with-out fail.'"

CHAPTER XXXIII

SOMETHING ABOUT JACK'S FATHER

THE eleven-forty-five train pulled into Denton on time, and Jack Ranger stepped to the depot platform.

"This way, Jack," spoke a voice, and Judge Bennett appeared from behind a pile of freight as if he had been hiding there. He rushed Jack towards a close carriage at the edge of the platform as if he was bent on concealing a criminal. He hustled Jack into the carriage.

"Take side streets, and rear entrance to my office," he brusquely ordered the driver, slammed the door, and very graciously shook hands with his fellow passenger.

"Well," aspirated Jack with a quizzical smile, "this is a rather brisk welcome, Judge Bennett."

"Simply follow out the lead of your eminent good sense in wiring myself, instead of alarming your relatives, Jack," stated the judge approvingly.

"Oh, you don't want anyone to see me and report to them that I am in town, is that it?" asked Jack.

"Exactly," bowed the Judge — "at least until I have had a little talk with you. The dear old ladies are very nervous on some subjects. Particularly the one suggested by that name — 'Orion Tevis.' Jack, in the name of wonder how did you ever get hold of it. But — never mind now. That later, for here we are at the office."

The vehicle had rapidly traversed retired streets of the village. Then it had turned into a side alley. Judge Bennett led Jack into his office by a rear route.

"In to nobody for an hour," he said crisply to his office clerk. "This way, Jack. Be seated."

Judge Bennett pulled up the bottom shades of his private office so as to shut out a view from the street. Jack sat down in a luxurious leather armchair. The Judge sank into another near his desk.

"Help yourself, Jack," he invited, pushing over a box of chocolates to his guest.

"Thanks," nodded Jack, tracing in all this an evident intention on the part of his host to put him in good humor and gain his confidence. He nibbled at one of the chocolates, and put it down with the words: "Rather light stuff after the strenuous life at Washington Hall."

"What can I offer you, then?" demanded the Judge, quite irritably.

"What's the particular need of anything?" in-

sinuated Jack. "Oh, yes — facts. That's what I've come for, Judge Bennett. Sir," continued Jack, looking the judge clearly in the eye, "you are probably the best friend and adviser our family ever had."

"Thank you, Jack," said the judge.

"As such, please be fair and open with me. I have a serious object in coming to you."

"Namely?"

"My father. Judge Bennett, I have heard somewhere of a book about a fellow in search of his father."

"I have heard of it, too," vaguely murmured Judge Bennett.

"That is the basis I am on. See here, Judge, I am a child no longer. There is some mystery in my life. What? It is concealed from me by my best friends. Why?"

Judge Bennett grew restless. He hemmed and hawed, got up, stirred restlessly about and then sat down again.

"To the legal mind, Jack," he observed, "you are a wonder. I declare, you put me crosswise. Here is my position: I am the repository of a certain trust. With it go certain restrictions of secrecy. Do you think I would be either much of a man or a lawyer, Jack, to betray my client's confidence?"

"No, sir," replied Jack heartily, "and don't

you do it, Judge Bennett. Only — hear my side of the story.”

“Go on, Jack.”

“If I have a father, and he is alive, one of two things follow: if he is in trouble, it is my duty to share it with him. If he is not in trouble, why don't he come into the daylight and show himself.”

Judge Bennett looked worried and sighed deeply, but remained silent.

“Now then,” went on Jack, “I am bound to know the truth of things. My aunts grow hysterical whenever I mention this mystery. That burglar, that ring, my father — they shut me up quick when I allude to these things. So, I have started out to find out for myself. I intend to. I've got the first clew: ‘Orion Tevis.’ Will you help me out further? No? All right. Then let me tell you what I have discovered, and maybe you will suggest something.”

“Jack,” observed Judge Bennett, “you have a clear, critical mind at least, and I admire you. Study for the law, my boy. Meantime, let us have your story.”

Jack drove head-foremost into facts. He narrated the story of the two rings clearly. He brought the narrative down to the sending of the telegram and the receipt of the judge's reply to the same.

"Sunday evening," Jack explained, "we took John Smith back to the Academy in a carriage. He is now at Washington Hall, under charge of the school physician."

"Have you had any further talk with him?" inquired the Judge.

"No, sir," answered Jack, "for the reason that he had not rallied from his stupor when I left. I presume his story, when he tells it, will throw further light on this matter of my father. Anyhow, it will reveal why those two burglars are so anxious about those two rings."

"Where are the rings now, Jack?" inquired Judge Bennett.

"I have ours. I will hand it over to you now for safe keeping," and Jack did so. "You can tell my aunts about its recovery or not, just as you please. The other ring Dr. Mead at the Academy holds in trust for Smith."

"Hum!" murmured Judge Bennett musingly. "A strange story — a strange and startling story. The burglars escaped?"

"Tooth and nail. We found they had hired the box wagon at Brocton."

"And the two rings recovered? How strange that you should meet the son of Alexander Smith —"

"Aha!" cried Jack, "how do you know that John Smith's father was Alexander Smith?"

Judge Bennett groaned and looked crestfallen. "Jack," he said, "you are too keen for me. Yes, I know that there was an Alexander Smith. I also know that he had a ring similar to the one stolen from Miss Angelina Stebbings, your aunt. I know a lot more. I wish you knew it, too. Candidly, I believe your clear, logical wit would grasp it all and utilize it all clearer than the whole lot of us put together."

"Why don't you tell me, and see?" suggested Jack.

"Can't, my boy. No, no, legal honor — fidelity to a client. Now let me think, let me think."

Judge Bennett got up and paced the floor for fully five minutes. His brow knitted, his eyes blinked, he got nervous following out some method of secret calculation.

"All right," he announced at length. "I have decided."

"What, Judge?" inquired Jack.

"How far we will go. You take the next train back to school, find out what young Smith has to tell, report back here, and I will submit the whole matter to your aunts."

"I am not to see my aunts now?"

"I wouldn't, this trip, Jack. It might disturb them."

"All right, Judge Bennett," said Jack promptly, arising. "Please write me a note for

Dr. Mead, advising him to allow me to come back here when I like, and I'll soon have this matter where you want it."

"A headstrong, but remarkable young man," commented Judge Bennett as Jack took back paths for a secluded depot a mile away from Denton.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DOWN AND OUT

"PROPOSITION one," pronounced Tom Adams.

"Fire away," said Jack Ranger.

Tom Adams was a new student at Rudmore Academy. With him were two other recent arrivals. All three were staunch Mudlarks and adherents of Jerry Chowden. They were true types of the bully ilk.

This the present situation showed. The scene was an old dismantled hay barn about a mile from Washington Hall. Jack sat on an old pile of straw on the floor of the cheerless structure. A piece of fence wire bound his ankles closely together. His hands were tied behind his back. Adams was consulting a card on which there seemed to be some written notes.

"Proposition one," he repeated: "Throw the base ball game this afternoon and you get five dollars."

"Entirely too cheap," announced Jack.

"Proposition two: Stay away from the game entirely and we make you lieutenant to Jerry Chowden."

"Oh, too much honor," declared Jack.

"Turned down?"

"Anything more."

"Yes," said Adams, "just this: you'll do just one of those two things and come in with the Mudlarks, or your name is mud without the larks. See here, Ranger, you're clever enough to see that we've got the bulge on you."

"I don't admit that. I'm mad enough to find out that, finding me looking for Nat Anderson, one of your precious crew steered me here. You had just enough to hold me down when I stumbled."

"Anderson has got his quietus right enough," nodded Adams sapiently. "If you insist on taking yours same fashion, all right. Neither of you will have any hand in the game this afternoon, that you can settle in your mind for keeps."

"You're a fine lot of pirates!" said Jack contemptuously.

"Can't help it," retorted Adams. "See here, Ranger, Chowden has simply got to win this game. If he don't, farewell to all his greatness. He's lost two, and half of his crowd are in mutiny. They threaten to depose him from the Mudlarks, they talk of electing a new leader at the meeting to-night. Jerry has got to head them off — he's simply got to win this game this afternoon to put him back in favor, or go down to disaster."

"Do you imagine that by keeping Nat and myself away the Outcasts won't be beat, anyway?" demanded Jack.

"I do. You two fellows have some new curves too wise for the Mudlarks. Well, I've said my say."

"And glory, I suppose, in doing Jerry Chowden's low-down work?"

"Do you agree, or not?"

"I disagree, distinctly."

"Then listen to me, Jack Ranger," proceeded Adams angrily. "We'll get you — strong and hard. You'll either do our bidding and switch to the Mudlarks, or you'll go back home, quick. Do you know what this is?"

Adams impressively drew a little slip of paper from his pocket. He waved it at Jack.

"That's a copy of an entry in the book of the man who runs the hardware store at Rudmore," Adams went on. "It is dated, and it says, 'Sold to Jack Ranger: one can of red paint.'"

Jack stared at the speaker with strange, sudden interest.

"Aha!" crowed Adams, misinterpreting this for alarm, "does that move you? Five days ago some one slipped into the library and drew a pair of red moustaches and a big meerschaum pipe on Professor Grimme's oil portrait there. You know the rumpus there's been about it. The

faculty even offer a reward for the fellow who did it. The story got wind about Grimm being caught smoking by you. No one else knew about it. You're under suspicion already. All right. I send Grimm that memorandum. I reckon that's a proof positive as to the culprit? Away you slide home — for good."

Jack indulged in a deep, prolonged whistle. He stared in a strange, penetrating way at Adams.

"You chumps," he cried, "do you actually mean to tell me that you don't really know who defaced that portrait?"

"Yah!" sneered Adams — "don't try bluff. Of course we do — you. Come," consulting his watch. "Game is nearly due. Do you come in with us, or do you take your medicine?"

Jack was getting mad. He tugged desperately at his hands. Then he quieted down.

"I'll make you smart for this," he observed. "Meantime — rush on your own destruction. If you only knew it, you're on a straight, short road."

"Come on, fellows," ordered Adams to his two companions. "Leave him to cool off here. We'll win this game, anyhow. That's all I agreed to do. Chowden can manage any later kick that may come up for himself."

They walked off forthwith. Jack started to

tell them something that might have checked them.

"Chowden is bound to have it, eh?" he murmured instead to himself. "All right. I won't blab, but when Chalmers hears of this I fancy the red paint episode will burst out in a new glare that will about blind the Mudlarks."

"Thasso — howdy."

"Hello, hello," cried Jack in the most complete stupefaction.

"Smealright," pronounced a nimble figure, descending from the hayloft. "Smatter now, Jack Ranger?"

"Budge!" cried Jack, "Budge Rankin! For mercy sake, how came you here? In the nick of time, too, a hundred miles from Denton —"

"Awgullong — no villian in the show dope at all. Lost my job at the print shop. Tramped it here. Bunked in the loft. Just woke up. Want a job. Get me in?"

"In where?" demanded Jack breathlessly.

"Fun-house Academy. Betcherlife you make it fun house. Got dull back at Denton. Can't you place me somewhere? Kitchen, garden work, janitor."

Budge, as original as ever, came into full view chewing gum as usual. He pulled out a long string of it from his mouth, chewed it in slowly again, and added:

"Imaskin ferinformation."

"Get me loose, Budge," said Jack, "and we'll think about it."

Budge soon had Jack free of his bonds. Jack's first move was to get out his watch and look at it.

"Half-an-hour," he observed. "Now then, Budge, fire away."

Budge was as terse and explicit as usual. He had been disturbed by the colloquy between Jack and Adams. He had waited a few minutes, and acted as disclosed. Jack shook him heartily by the hand, explained something of the cause of his present predicament, and told him to go at once to Washington Hall and tell his story to Socker, the Janitor, saying that he, Jack, had sent him.

"Hang around till the game is over, Budge," directed Jack. "We'll fix you out some way, then."

"Thanksawfly," nodded Budge. "Time for the game? Wallop those fellows."

"We'll try to — I shall try my hardest," pledged Jack.

"Thattle do. You'll win," nodded Budge in a satisfied way.

A yell of wild delight went up from the college campus as Jack Ranger walked leisurely out upon the diamond just as the game was called. A sudden chill followed a wild stare on the part of the Mudlarks on discovering him.

"There he is!"

"Can that be Jack Ranger?"

"Certainly."

"But how did he get away?"

"Don't ask me."

"He must be a wizard."

"Somebody helped him. Who is the traitor?"

"Not me!"

"I didn't help him!"

So the talk ran on. The evildoers were dumbfounded and mystified. Jack's appearance threw them into a regular panic, and they tried in vain to control themselves. Jerry Chowden was as pale as death and all through the game there was bungling on his part, that brought forth severe comment.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's got the rattles bad!"

"Brace up, Jerry, can't you?"

"You're worse than a wooden horse!"

What a game! How Jack Ranger threw all his soul into it! He seemed to seize the situation with vivid genius, and inspired his comrades to their best efforts, likewise.

Little Meridith came running up to Jack just as the ninth inning closed and the Outcasts stood flushing with triumph.

"Say, Jack Ranger," panted the little fellow,

“John Smith’s better and sitting up. He wants to see you. But I must hurry back to tell him which side won.”

“Eleven to nothing,” announced Sam Chalmers, holding a score card towards the inquirer. “Tell John Smith that the Mudlarks and all their precious mob are whitewashed — Jerry Chowden is down and out.”

CHAPTER XXXV

CONCLUSION

JACK stood holding both hands of John Smith in a friendly, joyful grasp. Smith sat by a window propped up in a broad armchair.

"Well as ever!" cried Jack, with sparkling eyes. "Smith, I can't tell you how happy it makes me."

John Smith smiled with pleasure. He looked thin and wan, but the sight of his noble young friend seemed to inspire him with new life.

"Not quite yet well as ever, Ranger," he said, "but the doctor says another week will put me on my feet steady and strong. It seems awful good to have him let down the bars at last and allow me to welcome my friends once more. And now, Ranger, for a good long talk."

Jack had so many questions long bottled up to ask his friend that at first his words tripped all over each other.

"Better let me first tell you how I got in that fix with those burglars," suggested Smith.

"That's it — fire away," directed Jack.

John Smith went back to the day of the first

base-ball game of the term. He had received a note urging him to meet an "old friend" at a certain place near the lake at a certain time. Smith arrived at the rendezvous to find two men waiting for him in a rowboat.

He was unsuspecting of trickery. One of them vaguely stated that he came from Canada, and brought a message from old friends in Smith's native town. They hinted at seclusion, and induced their victim to get into the boat. They rowed across the lake, landed, led the way to a lonely grove, and, suddenly seizing Smith, tied his hands behind him.

Then one of the men promptly told him that the whole business was a ruse to get him into their power. They wanted one thing of him: — a certain ring, the ring, in fact, that Nat Anderson had found later that afternoon in Smith's rummaged room.

Smith stubbornly declined to say one word about the ring. The men searched him then, struck him harshly, threatened all kinds of things, but he was as firm as a stoic. They held a whispered conversation. One of them left, probably to ransack Smith's belongings at the Hall. He came back fierce and ugly. They had told Smith that they would keep him a prisoner, and might finally kill him, if he did not divulge the whereabouts of the ring in question.

"They kept me in an old shed in a field that night," narrated Smith. "Next morning one of them went away and returned with a box wagon. I was put into it. I overheard a good deal of what they said. They were aiming, first, to get me quietly away from the immediate neighborhood of the Academy. They forced some terrible drug down me. I remember being in a sort of a funny doze, and hearing voices, and got it into my head somehow that I was near you fellows. I remember yelling out a little later.

"Yes, that must have been in the carriage shed, down at Mr. Tibbs' farm," nodded Jack.

"One of the men chloroformed me afresh. Then more funny stupors, and getting back here, and — you'll have to tell the rest, Ranger."

Jack did so. He narrated not only the story of the exciting night at the old farm house, but also in detail the history and the mystery of the duplicated rings.

"And now, Smith," he concluded anxiously, "can you throw any light on all this?"

"Ranger," responded Smith with some emotion, "you and I should be very close friends, for certainly your father and my father were."

"What, you know that?" cried Jack hopefully.

"I do, now. I didn't, before. Your strange story about the rings has made it pretty plain to

me. Listen: before my father died he gave me that ring Nat Anderson found in my room. He told me to always keep it. He said that if ever I got poor, or in trouble, to take it to one Orion Tevis, tell him I was the son of Alexander Smith, and he would treat me like an own son."

"And about my father?" urged Jack.

"My father told me a strange story," went on Smith. "He said that some ten years ago a man named Orion Tevis came up into Oregon, where he was. He asked my father to undertake to guide him to a wild forest country far to the north. It seemed that he had bought there over five thousand acres of valuable timber land. Some schemers had stolen some of the papers connected with it. Further, they were now making for the land to get there first and take possession. Whoever got there first, it seemed, and took formal possession, was safe in a certain title."

"I see," nodded Jack interestedly — "pre-emption laws, and all that."

"Tevis was too sickly to make the journey himself. My father was instructed to secure two fellow guides. He did so: a man named Clark, a very old man, and another, named Roberts."

"My father's name was Robert," said Jack.

"I am sure now Roberts was your father," continued Smith. "He was on a visit from the East, and he was the soul of the dashing enter-

prise. This became a hot race between the two interests. Roberts not only managed to get back the stolen papers for Tevis, but he reached the timber land first, met the requirements of the law fully, and he and my father and Clark returned to report to Tevis."

"I would like to make a trip like that," said Jack.

"Well, Tevis was delighted. He gave each of the three men ten thousand dollars. He had three rings made as mementos of their grand success—two of them you have seen. He told Roberts, Clark and my father that any time they or their relatives came to him, they should have all the money or help they needed. Clark was lost in an avalanche slide in Washington, the next year. My father retired on his little fortune."

"And my father?" murmured Jack.

"Well, my father saw him once after that, he told me. It seems that the baffled schemers after the land offered Roberts a vast sum to help them dispute the title, but he refused. They threatened to hunt him down for the rest of his life. Then they learned that by some crook of the law, that if they could get him into court they could throw the timber claim into litigation, and so delay and hamper Tevis that he could be forced to pay a big lot of money to compromise with them. My father says that Roberts told him he had sent

his ten thousand dollars to his sisters and an only son. He said that Tevis had sold or donated a part of the land to educational and charitable institutions. Roberts told my father that rather than be even innocently dragged into the litigation, he would become a fugitive and wanderer on the face of the earth."

"It all tallies," cried Jack—"Roberts was Robert Ranger, my father."

"My father said also that he regarded Roberts the noblest, self-sacrificing man he had ever met, and that if Roberts could evade legal service for eleven years, I think, the law was he could utterly defeat the wicked designs of the schemers."

"And these burglars," said Jack—"are they a part of the old gang?"

"Not at all," answered Smith readily. "I happen to know that from their conversation I overheard. They know all about these matters, but their scheme was to get the three rings. Clark's was lost with him. They made for you and for me. Their idea was to get the rings, trump up a specious story, and, armed with them, send two boys representing you and I to bleed Orion Tevis."

"And where is this Orion Tevis, do you know?" inquired Jack.

"Only this: he left word with my father that his address could always be secured from the Cap-

ital Bank, at Denver. My father said he believed he was living in great retirement, somewhere in a wild part of the Rocky Mountains."

"He must know something of my father's whereabouts," said Jack.

"I think not. From what my father said, your father was so tracked and hounded down by the schemers he dared not show himself to any of his former friends, especially Orion Tevis, whom they would certainly keep track of."

"All right," said Jack, with a deep drawn breath of satisfaction, "I know now just what to do."

Jack went at once to Dr. Mead and showed him Judge Bennett's letter. He secured instant permission to go to Denton.

Jack was back at the Academy early next morning. He had visited Judge Bennett, but without much satisfaction resulting from the interview.

"What you tell me, we already know," asserted the judge. "That burglar has haunted the home of your aunts for over a year, off and on. Your father is alive — we know that, but where he is we do not know. Rest contented, Jack. The eleven years will soon be up, and he will then return to his family."

Jack said nothing, but he thought a good deal. He had one satisfaction; he now knew the real

merits of the strange issolation of his nearest relative in the world.

"Ranger to the office," ordered Martin, the monitor, almost as soon as Jack had returned to the Academy.

"I shall go with you," observed Sam Chalmers, appearing mysteriously, as if he had been lying in wait, hooking his arm in that of his favorite chum, and proceeding down the corridor with him. "I imagine what's up and fancy I am interested," declared Sam. Here we are.

Jack found two stern-browed persons awaiting him in the office — Dr. Mead and Professor Grimm.

"Ranger," said Dr. Mead instantly, "we have a serious charge against you."

"An outrageous charge," put in Professor Grimm hotly. "It involves not only an act of vandalism, but a base betrayal of confidence."

"I wish you would explain, Dr. Mead," said Jack with all the calmness of certain innocence.

"Very well. We find from documentary evidence placed in our hands secretly, that you purchased a can of red paint at Rudmore the day that Professor Grimm's portrait was defaced."

"I did," acknowledged Jack frankly. "I intended to use it to help Mr. Socker repaint the old gig the college gave him."

"And instead used it for the purpose I have designated," observed Dr. Mead scowling.

"No, sir," answered Jack.

"You did," proclaimed Professor Grimm. "No one but you could have thought of painting that pipe in my mouth. You knew of my — of my — indulgence in a pipe for — for catarrhal reasons," stumbled the professor.

"Professor Grimm," said Jack, "no one ever has heard, and never will hear of that episode from my lips."

"Then who did it? Do you know — do you suspect?" urged Dr. Mead.

Jack was silent.

"I insist, Ranger, on an explicit reply to my question."

"I decline to reply," said Jack quietly.

"Then I expel you —" began Dr. Mead stormily.

"Wait a minute, Dr. Mead," put in Sam Chalmers bluntly. "Jack Ranger is too loyal to tell, even on an enemy. All the same, I won't stand by and see him wronged. Sir, the night that daubing was done, Ranger, Nat Anderson and myself saw Jerry Chowden steal the paint from Ranger's room. Later we saw him drop his red stained sweater and a brush of his own, bearing his initials, in the old cistern near the tool house. If you doubt it, go there and find them."

Ten minutes later Jerry Chowden was in evidence. He confessed his guilt when confronted with undeniable proof of the same. He also admitted that Professor Grimm's nephew, Lem, had written him about the smoking episode.

The next morning Jerry Chowden left Washington Hall for a two-months' term of disgrace and retirement.

"That clears the air, for a spell, at least," said Nat Anderson, as the leader of the Mudlarks disappeared in the direction of the railroad depot at Rudmore.

"And now, what's the programme?" inquired John Smith, who stood with the little coterie of friends at the Academy entrance.

"Jolly good time at famous old Washington Hall!" answered Jack Ranger buoyantly.

"Some study, a little sleep, and lots of fun," proclaimed Sam.

"Pzznt!" put in Will Slade. "S-s-say, R-R-Ranger, that b-b-boy, B-B-Budge, g-g-got the j-j-job you m-m-men-men-mentioned, as sec-sec-second ja-ja-janitor."

"Rolling watermelons!" voiced Nat Anderson boisterously, "Jack is filling up the school to the danger line with the introduction of so many choice spirits."

Musical Fred Kaler drew out a tin fife from his pocket and piped up a rally call.

"Start for the campus, fellows," he ordered. "Get in line for a grand march of fun and frolic, to last clear till next vacation."

"Vacation?" said Jack Ranger, in an undertone to John Smith — "you and I will go in search of Orion Tevis in his wild-west seclusion, eh?"

"That suits me," said John Smith. And go they did, and what strange adventures befel them will be related in another volume, to be called, "Jack Ranger's Western Trip; Or, From Boarding School to Ranch and Range."

A little later the semi-Indian student insisted upon making a short speech.

"Fellows," he said, "you who stood by me and helped me when I was in trouble, I want to thank you all, and especially I want to thank my good friend and comrade, Jack Ranger."

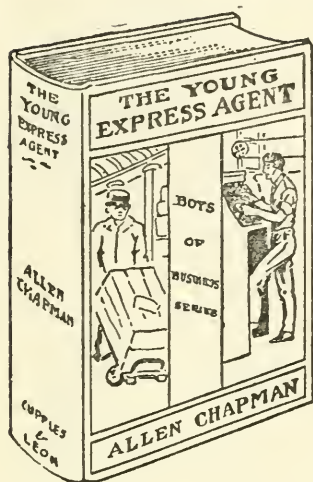
"Three cheers for him!" shouted Sam Chalmers, tossing his cap into the air.

"And three cheers for famous, jolly old Washington Hall!" added Jack Ranger.

THE END.

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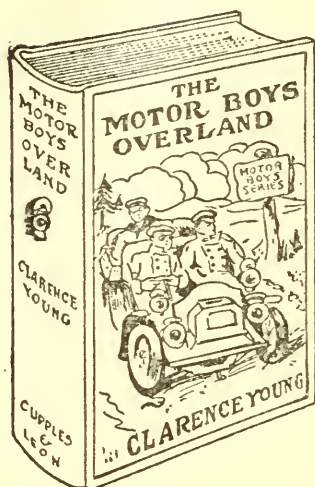
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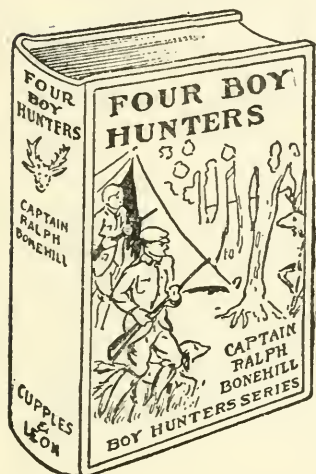
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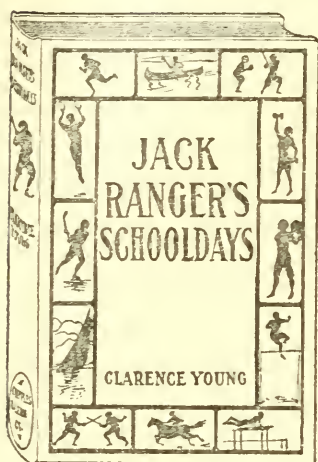
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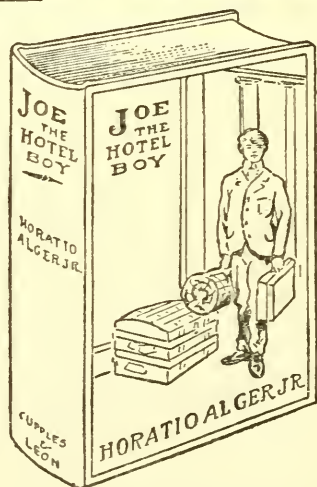
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